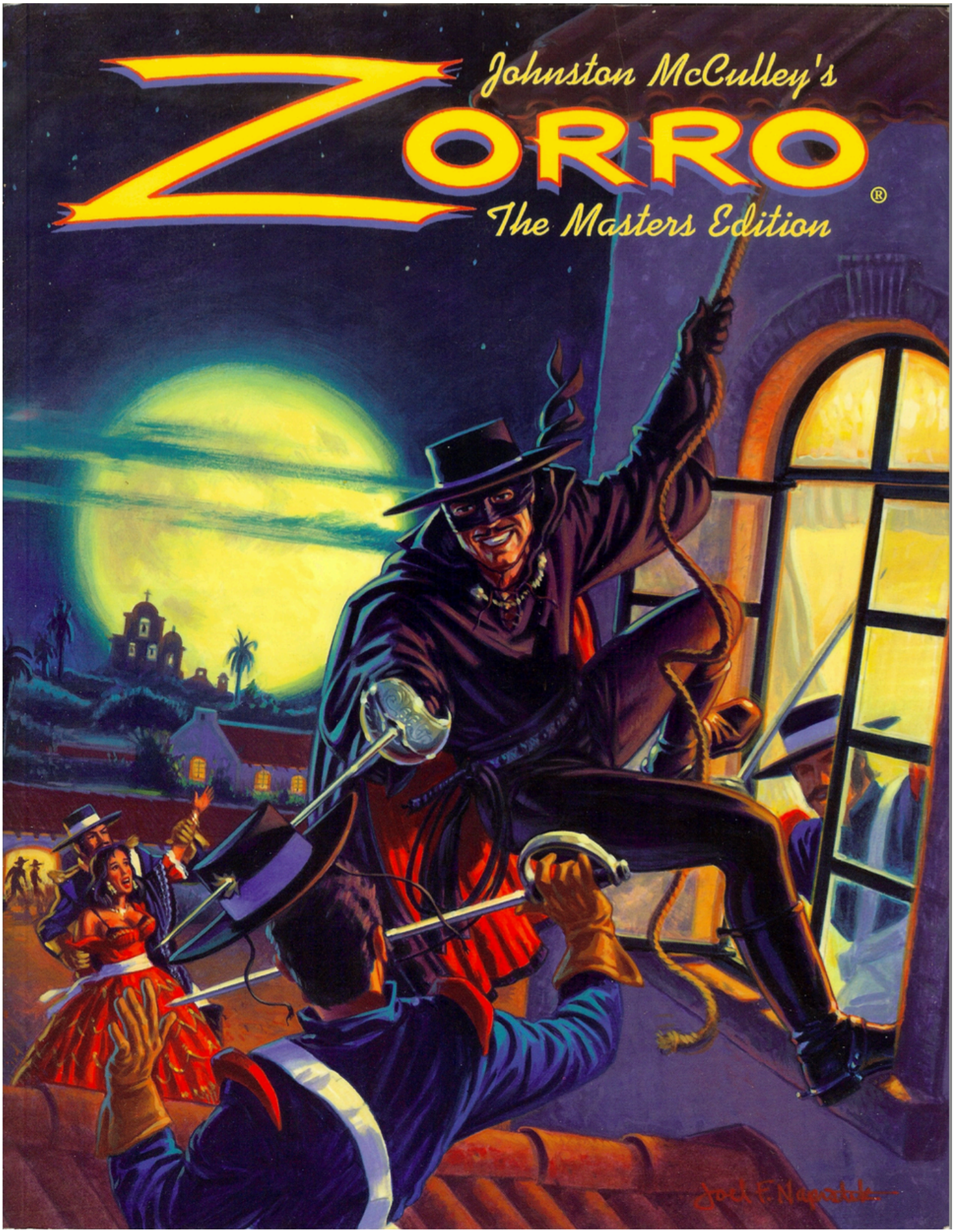
Johnston McCulley's
ZORRO®
The Masters Edition

Fight and Flight

"FIGHT, rogue !" Gonzales howled.

"I have no wish to kill you capitán. To disgrace you will be enough."

The capitán's blade flew from his hand to strike the ground a short distance away. The capitán, mad with rage, dropped a hand to get his pistol. Zorro had discharged his, and it was empty.

"Would you fight unfairly ?" Zorro cried at him. "This must be your punishment, then."

His blade darted forward. Capitán Gonzales felt scorching fire on his cheek. A cry of rage escaped him, for he knew what had been done to him. He would bear that jagged letter Z, the mark of Zorro, to the grave with him.

Then Zorro was bending from the saddle, clasping him and tearing the pistol away, to hurl it to the ground. He tossed Capitán Gonzales out of his saddle and gave a wild laugh, wheeled his horse, bent low, and raced down the canyon.

"After him ! Shoot him down ! Do not let him escape !" Capitán Gonzales was screeching, as he struggled to get back into the saddle again.

Madly, Zorro rode, the big black horse hurdling rocks and clumps of brush. He approached another and larger clearing, and saw trouble ahead.

Not all the force of troopers had been led deeply into the canyon by the capitán. Here a few were kept in reserve, to capture any trying to flee.

Señor Zorro saw four men before him, all mounted, and now they began riding forward, converging upon him. His pistol was empty, he had only his blade. He rode straight toward them, but pulled rein slightly and slackened speed. But they came on at him, and behind him Capitán Gonzales and others broke from the brush in pursuit.

Señor Zorro was between two fires....

Johnston McCulley's

ZORRO

The Masters Edition

~ Volume One ~

by

Johnston McCulley

Pulp Adventures, Inc. • Madison, Wisconsin

ABOUT THIS EDITION....

You are about to read (for the first time in almost seventy years), the original novellas, novelettes, and short stories Johnston McCulley wrote in his Zorro series. We are reprinting all of these in the order they were first published in the pulp magazines. You will notice some archaic grammar and spelling. They have been retype set, but not one word of the original text has been changed.

Enjoy...

Thank You !

John Gertz, Ben Kaplan, and everyone at Zorro Productions, Inc. (http://www.zorro.com)

The Zorro Fan Club (http://www.webring.org/cgi-bin/webring?ring=zorro;list)

The Guy Williams Fan Club (http://www.neontiger.net/gwol/)

Joel F. Naprstek (For the title, mentoring, and class)

Steve Miller, Jerry Boylihan, Rita Winters, Karen Powell (For the pulp magazine illustrations)

Don McGregor (Who battled convention fatigue and the hospital to write about The Fox)

Pamela Hazelton (For the interior artists)
Media Services International, Inc. (info@mediasi.com)

Richard Wentworth (aka The Spider)

Rich Harvey, Alex Toth, Mark Wheatley at Insight Studios, Dad, Jerry

And especially for Pulp Magazine Fans-without them, most of this great fiction would have been lost.

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Dueling Zorros and Sinister Pine Trees

By Don McGregor

In 1919, the Fox was born. He probably came close to death that year, also.

It is pretty apparent Johnston McCulley had no idea that the Fox, *el Zorro*, would have more lives than a cat, when he wrote his first serialized novel, *The Curse Of Capistrano*, in All-Story Weekly.

Zorro began as the mysterious masked rogue riding through early Los Angeles' night winds on August 9, 1919. By August 30, 1919, Zorro had brought justice to the disenfranchised, the peons and the Indians, defeated the public official who abused the power of his position, declared undying love for Lolita, the Señorita who made the blood rush in his veins. Why is it, I believe, no writer would name a heroine Lolita these days, after the publication of Vladimir Nabakov's novel?

And, oh, yes, the Fox pulled off his mask!

And revealed his identity as Don Diego to everyone, of every station, high and low, in the pueblo of Los Angeles in the early 1800s!

Everyone knew who Zorro was!

It was probably Douglas Fairbanks' starring as the masked caballero in the 1920 film, *The Mark Of Zorro*, that gave the Fox a whole slew of new lives.

And offered a challenge to Johnston McCulley.

How to keep the persona of Zorro, the man with the alter ego, the gay blade by night, the fop by day?

In 1922, for *The Further Adventures Of Zorro*, McCulley starts the story with Diego's bachelor party night. Lolita is kidnapped by pirates. You know, being this is early 1800's California, Lolita's age could well have been pretty young, come to think of it, and hardly anyone would have given a second thought about her being a bride. It was not uncommon to have woman betrothed in the early teens.

Interestingly, and not a little bit bizarrely, Diego does not dress as Zorro when he goes in pursuit of Lolita. One of the most intriguing schisms of alter ego in dual identity fiction occurs while our hero dangles over the

side of the pirate galleon, talking to Lolita about her plight through a ship porthole. Every time she calls him, *'Diego,'* he emphatically demands she call him *'Zorro,'* because that is who he is, masked or not, when his fighting blood is up.

Holy dual identity crisis!

One can only speculate what happened on the actual wedding night!

When I was a kid, I didn't know a thing about Johnston McCulley.

I'm not sure when I learned about Douglas Fairbanks.

There's a good chance I saw the Tyrone Power 1940 *The Mark Of Zorro* on TV, although I don't recall it.

What I knew most in the 1950's was Guy Williams as Zorro! And the theme song still plays in my head sometimes when I'm writing Zorro.

I wince when I admit, that as a kid, for some reason there was a time I thought the Lone Ranger's name was the *"Long"* Ranger. And whenever I sang, *"Out of the night, when the full moon is bright,"* when I came to the lyrics, *"O this bold renegade..."* I always heard them as, *"O he's bold and he's gay O"*. Isn't it something? Once you know what the real name, or the real words are, you can't figure out how you didn't know all along.

Now that I've written many Zorro stories for comics in the past years, I've tried to have at least some exposure to most of the guises the Fox has appeared in.

I'm far from an expert.

But it's funny because when you get the chance to write dearly loved and well-known characters like James Bond and Zorro, (and I've had the privilege to do both) it is at once exciting and intimidating. You can't come to them and be entirely slavish to what has gone before or you will bring nothing new and vital to your story, yet you must not betray the character you yourself loved so dearly.

The kid who grew up in Rhode Island would never have believed he would one day write Zorro or James Bond.

The teenager who started reading Ian Fleming long before John F. Kennedy made it fashionable or the first Sean Connery Bond film had been made, would have looked at you with arched eyebrow and incomprehension if you told him he'd one day write his own Bond adventure.

The young guy who peddled his bike for miles to find packs of Topps Zorro Trading Cards, searching from store to store, town to town, on nothing less than a quest to get ALL the cards, would have been dumbfounded to one day hear he would write the words that Zorro would say.

"Get outta here!" would probably have been my response.

One of my earliest recollections of Zorro is this:

I'm a kid. I'm maybe 7 or 8 years old. I haven't seen Guy Williams as Zorro yet, because the Disney TV series doesn't exist yet.

But what I have seen are Republic serials.

The Mysterious Dr. Satan almost ended my life at six years old, but I won't detail how that happened here.

If I didn't know about Johnston McCulley or Douglas Fairbanks as a kid, I certainly didn't know about Yakima Canutt, either.

But I'd seen him, even if I didn't know it.

Seen him go under a careening stagecoach in *Zorro's Fighting Legion*, landing between the stomping hoofs of the team racing in their traces! Seen him grab onto the back end of the coach after he tumbled and twisted under it, as it hurtled over him. Seen him manage, somehow, miraculously, grab onto the rear end of the coach as it went past him, and pull himself up onto its back! Saw him do it with what looked like ease! Seen him climb back atop the coach to confront the bad guy who'd nearly gotten him trampled in the first place! That was before John Ford's *Stagecoach*, which had him merely fall between running horses and let a coach go over

him. He didn't have to twist and turn, he was supposed to be dead. He wasn't Zorro, then, he was an Indian. Indians were expendable in Hollywood.

Right now, the sequence I'm writing for the syndicated Zorro newspaper strip (Contact your local paper and Creators Syndicate if you want your area to carry it) is a coach chase that goes at break-neck speed for two-months running! Wait'll you see the January 1, 2000 strip! The whole sequence is a homage to every coach chase I've ever seen, from Republic serials to B Westerns, to *Stagecoach*, with a little *Ben-Hur* thrown into the mix.

Who would-a thunk?

Not me.

That's not my earliest personal memory of Zorro. I'm 7 or 8, like I wrote earlier.

I'm up to my mom, Louise McGregor's, parents house, my grandparent's place. There was a large front yard, with a rose trellis down by a two-lane road. There was one of those old cement fish ponds where, during the frigid New England winters, I could kneel on the ice, and peer down through the gray layers, and see goldfish frozen in place, who would miraculously start swimming when spring began. There were hills in the back where a guy could ride his imaginary horse, and fight the bad guys, tumbling down the hillside, just the way they did in the movies. Or least, so he imagined.

One afternoon I was out in the front yard.

I am Zorro.

I am up against many villainous men all armed with swords!

I thrust and I parry with 7 or 8 year old energy. Of course, I know nothing of terms like thrust and parry.

I hack and slash, rip the swords from one challenger's hand to the next.

The amount of foes seem inexhaustible!

Until all the arms, all the hands that could hold swords are too high for me to reach.

I had hacked through all the lower branches of the enormous, towering pine tree that stood sentinel duty over my grandparent's house. Fought with my make-shift wood sword until I'd broken each limb off in my battle for justice. Pine limbs were scattered on the lawn around my feet. There were so many I was tripping over them.

I was sweating.

But I was **TRIUMPHANT!**

This is not the kind of triumph you tell to adults. You carry the victory in your head as you look for the next adventure.

When I left my grandparent's house, no one knew I had slain the bottom four feet of the pine tree.

My grandmother, Marguerite Besson, would take me up to her place once a week. She always brought me a present. I loved it, since it was a great place to ride make-believe horses hell-bent for leather (whatever that means) and chop branches off sinister pine trees.

By the time she came to pick me up the next week, she knew what I'd done to that beautiful tree that towered up into the sky. She did what adults must do and told me it was a bad thing I'd done. I can't remember, but I don't believe I told her I was really doing good by dueling badness. I think I suspected she would have no idea what I was talking about.

I was talking about being Zorro.

After the lecture, she gave me my weekly present, one of those old stamp books, where you had to find the stamp and lick in its proper page.

Nowadays I live every day with Zorro. I hear his voice in my head. I have to hear it before I can write the lines he will speak. If I don't hear the words, I can't write them.

If you want to see some of the beautiful art and color work for the series :

Zorro: Mantanzas!

which has, at this point been over

FIVE YEARS IN THE MAKING,

and you own a computer, you can click onto :

http://www.donmcgregor.com

and go into the Zorro site.

We show different art by Mike Mayhew, with evocative water color painting by Sam Parsons. You're going to love this stuff. It'll also keep you up-to-date with what's happening currently with that and other Zorro projects.

Zorro has a roguish sense of humor and, I suspect, when needed a sense of blood and passion. He is a man of enlightenment in his time and place. He is a sexier character than most title characters of pulp series. Women love him, and he loves them!

Anyhow, over the years, Zorro has spoken to many of us. I'm sure to all of you buying this book of Johnston McCulley's Zorro pulp adventures. Many of you have your own version of the sinister pine tree story.

So now, start reading the stories that started it all.

Enjoy!

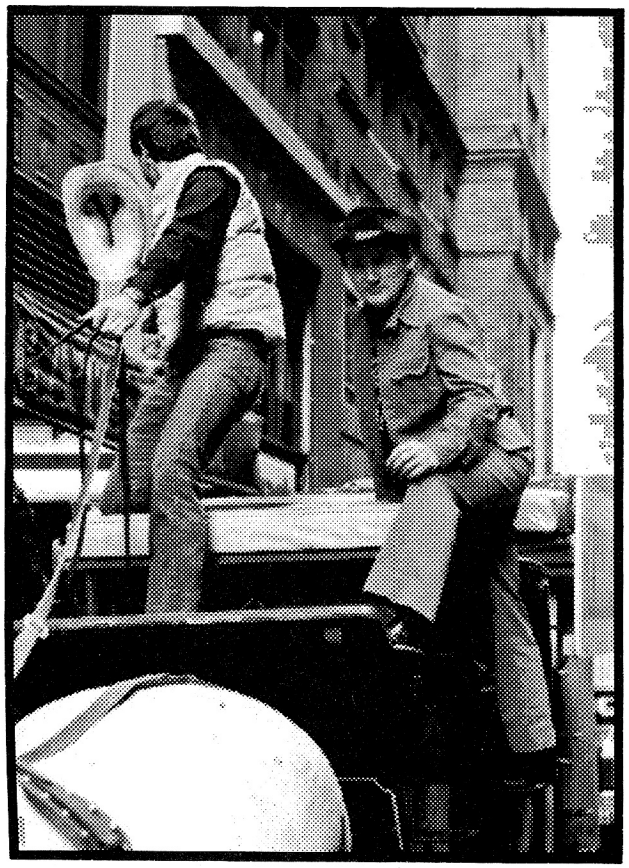
The Fox transcends centuries.

And come this new Millennium, Zorro is still on the move!

DON McGREGOR

Still riding fast –

November 4, 1999



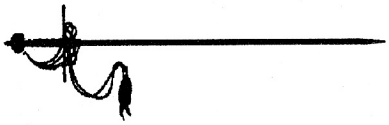
Don McGregor, right:
"The sequence I'm writing for the Zorro newspaper strip is a coach chase that goes at breakneck speed for two months running! ...The whole sequence is a homage to every coach chase I've ever seen..."

The Adventure Begins...

ZORRO

Saves A Friend

The keen rapier and quick wit of the masked outlaw Zorro were legend in Spanish California– And there was need for them now !



Chapter One
A Pirate Drops A Hint

EMERGING from his father's pretentious town house, Don Diego Vega stood for a moment on the stoop, dainty scented handkerchief brushing his nostrils, his left hand resting on the jeweled hilt of his rapier.

The siesta hour was at an end, the cool breeze was starting to drift in from the distant sea, and the shadows were lengthening and pointing toward the east in the little plaza of the pueblo of Reina de Los Angeles.

Persons of quality were coming forth, dressed in their best finery, to promenade and greet one another, to visit from house to house, purchase wares from the merchants, gossip and chat, frolic and flirt and mayhap quarrel a bit.

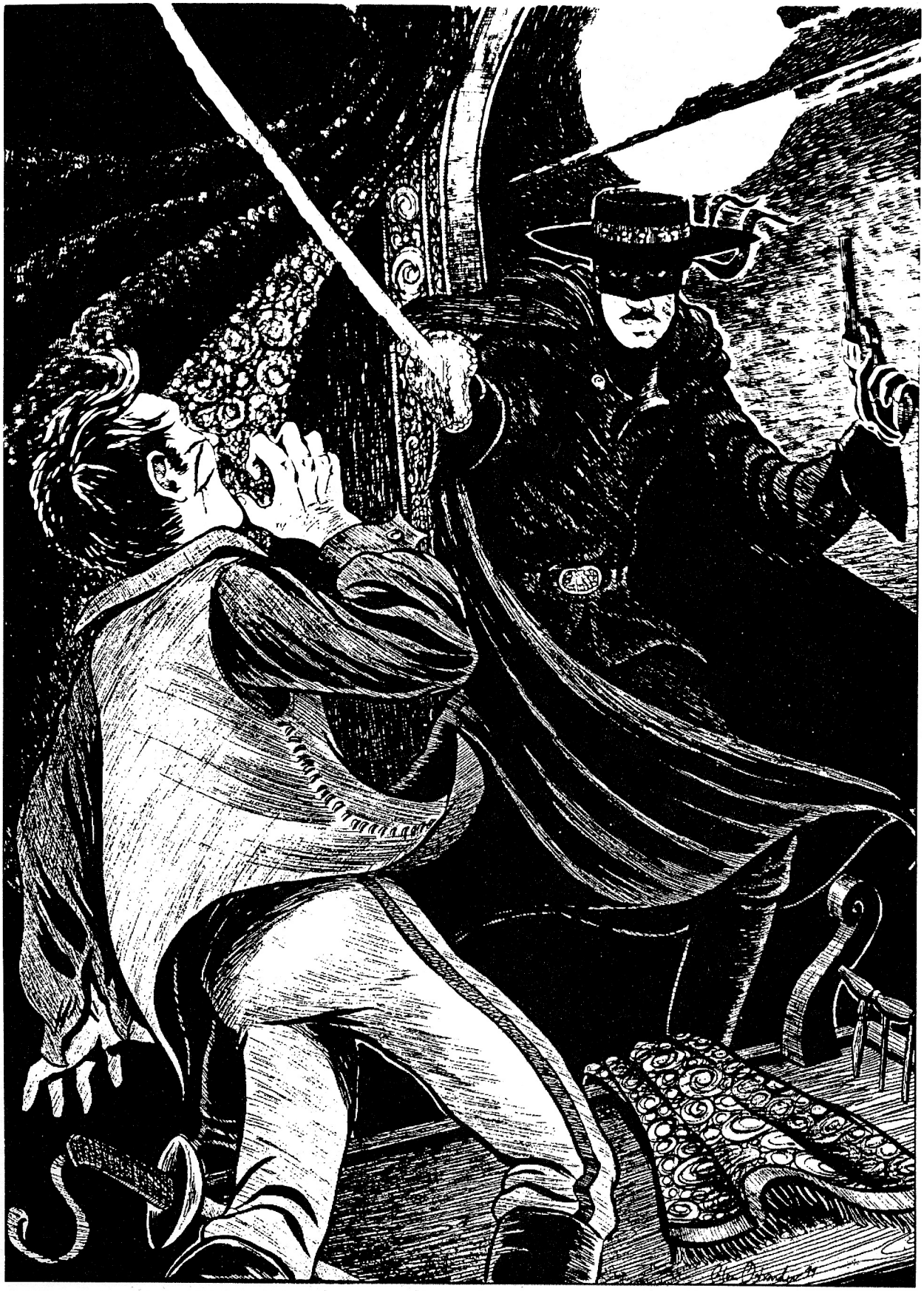
Young caballeros wandered toward the inn for a mug of spiced wine and a fling at cards or dice. Dainty señoritas tripped along, each with a grim duenna at heel. Proud hidalgos strutted. Robed Franciscans went leisurely about their serious business of mending bodies and souls. Natives, both neophyte and gentile, ran errands, or stretched in the dust and sand on the shady sides of adobe huts, to drowse and dream, perhaps to tell tall tales of that new and astonishing young outlaw who called himself Señor Zorro, and robbed the rich and tyrannical to befriend such as themselves.

Don Diego Vega sighed and began his stroll. Something of a dandy was this Don Diego Vega, too quiet by far to please his impetuous father, too lacking in fire and spirit. He disliked the usual pursuits of the other young bloods. He did not indulge much in strong drink, did not play much at dice or cards, seldom indulged in a quarrel, never strummed a guitar beneath a window, and refused to mount the fiery stallion his father had purchased for him and race with others out to some hacienda for a day and night of frolic; then back through the misty dawn. He even perused the works of poets!

Yet all made obeisance to Don Diego Vega as he passed, for his father was a powerful man who could not be affronted with impunity, and Don Diego himself had personal qualities which endeared him to many, despite his disinclination to be a man of intense action.

Don Diego appeared to be almost half asleep this day as he sauntered along, seeking the shady spots, his scented handkerchief at his nostrils, saluting those he passed but not loitering for conversation. Natives bowed before him and backed out of his path, and for some strange reason looked after him with expressions of adoration in their usually dull faces.

Don Diego seemed to have no particular ob-



Zorro retreated … and then Lopez felt another burning sting on his cheek.

jective this day, but to be taking the air aimlessly. He kept to the west side of the plaza, as though making his way leisurely around it and toward the inn. But his course brought him past the adobe hut wherein lived a certain Bardoso, a reformed and retired pirate.

This Bardoso, a man with only one good eye–he having lost the other in some brawl on the high seas years before–sat on a bench on the shady side of his hut, a jug of wine at his side, and a cutlass strapped to his thigh.

He was a thing to terrify children, this Bardoso, regarding whom many bloody tales had been told, some of them fact and a great many fiction. He had unusual visitors at times–men who traveled, mostly by night, up and down El Camino Real, as they called the highway which connected the Franciscan missions in a long chain.

With his one good eye this Bardoso beheld the approach of Don Diego Vega, straightened himself somewhat on the bench, and seemed to be collecting his courage. Don Diego often stopped for a word with him, which was queer for a man loving peaceful pursuits. It was the attraction of opposites, said the Franciscans and other educated folk.

Bardoso got to his feet and bowed from the waist, an act which caused him to expel his breath in a peculiar, choking grunt, for he was somewhat inclined to fat around his middle, as a result of much food and little exercise.

"A good day to you, Bardoso!" Don Diego greeted, waving his hand languidly. Then he would have passed on, but Bardoso's words halted him.

"It is truly an excellent day, Don Diego Vega," Bardoso replied. "The high fog has tempered the burning rays of the sun, and there is a fresh breeze. A beautiful day, indeed, upon which there should be no evil. Yet evil we have, Don Diego, to mar the splendor of this perfect weather."

"How is this?" Don Diego asked, arching his brows in question. "You perhaps have received news of some atrocity? There is new trouble in the land or on the sea?"

"The thing at which I have hinted is here at home, Don Diego–here in Reina de Los Angeles, under our very noses," Bardoso replied.

"These are, indeed, turbulent times." Don Diego sighed, and brushed his scented handkerchief across his nostrils again, at which motion Bardoso winced, knowing that perhaps he did not smell any too sweet.

"It is a thing, Don Diego, in which you may be interested personally," Bardoso went on to say. "It has to do with one of your friends."

"What is this?" Don Diego turned toward the erstwhile pirate and betrayed a sudden interest.

"If the señor will be gracious enough to allow me to explain–"

"Do so, good Bardoso. But shorten your words as much as possible."

BARDOSO bowed low, and grunted again. "Lately come to the pueblo," he said, "is a certain Marcos Lopez, a man of fine raiment and furtive eyes. He apes the caballero, but his soul is that of scum."

"I have noted him."

"He is a professional gambler, that one, and each afternoon and evening holds his game at the inn or in the big barracks room at the presidio. He is adept alike with cards and dice."

"It does not interest me," Don Diego said. "There are many such traveling up and down El Camino Real, from San Francisco de Asis to San Diego de Alcala. They are pests indeed, but serve to aid some men to while away dull hours."

"At the expense of their purses."

"Quite true! But a man is expected to pay for his pleasure, is he not?"

"Any man of real spirit, Don Diego, is inclined to take a fling at the gods of chance on occasion, to try his fortune. But, if there is no chance?"

"What is this you say?"

"The man is a cheat, señor–a professional cheat. I know of him, Don Diego. He can make the cards and dice do as he wills. And, behind his presence here in Reina de Los Regales there also is a plot."

"Get to the meat of it!" Don Diego begged.

"The air is warm, and I am overdue now for a cup of chilled wine. Moreover, there is dust in the air."

"It is well known–is it not?–that his excellency, the Governor, is jealous of this Southland and the foremost men in it. The hidalgos do not bow to him enough to please his excellency. They are of better blood, which irks him."

"Quite true," Don Diego admitted. "His excellency is but a scurvy politician."

"And he can fight his betters only through un-

derhand methods, Don Diego. Let us suppose, then, that he sends a clever gambling cheat this way. This cheat, this Marcos Lopez, ruined a dozen good men in the vicinity of Santa Barbara. He is trying to ruin some here, being under orders to do so. Do you not comprehend, señor? He gets a young caballero in his cups, gets him to play. The caballero loses heavily–and a debt of honor always must be satisfied."

"Again, true," said Don Diego.

"He is in league with Capitán Torello, the comandante of the presidio, who is, quite naturally, the Governor's man."

"This is a serious accusation you make, Bardoso."

"But I know the truth of these things, señor, else I'd not bother your ears with them. I have friends who bring me reliable information."

"And why bother my ears with it at all?" Don Diego wished to know. "I have not diced with the fellow, nor flipped a card with him."

"You perhaps are too wise to do so, Don Diego–but some others are not. Others are not so well controlled as you when it comes to games of chance. With some men, it is like a fever in the veins. I speak to you thus because of your friend."

"I have many friends."

"But this is a very special friend of yours, Don Diego; one unto you almost as a blood brother. I am speaking of Don Carlos Cassara. Have you not noticed that lately he wears a worried look?"

"I have," Don Diego replied, sudden concern in his face. "I had thought it a bit of stomach trouble, because of too much rich food and wine."

"Purse trouble, Don Diego. Remorse. The pain that afflicts a man when he realizes that he has made a fool of himself. The agony of a man trapped and unable to escape."

"Speak more clearly."

"This Marcos Lopez has cheated him, mulcted him, kept him playing on in a hopeless endeavor to regain his losses," Bardoso explained.

"The old folly of tossing good gold after bad," Don Diego observed.

"Your friend, Don Carlos Cassara, who lately inherited his father's estate, is on the verge of ruin. It is being talked about. He will be taking his own life, as a matter of honor–"

"Dios!" Don Diego breathed.

"Your pardon for speaking to you of such things, Don Diego, but I thought you should know."

"I thank you, Bardoso. You did right to so inform me. But what can be done in the matter? Can I, Don Diego Vega, soil my hands or my blade by use on such scum as this Marcos Lopez?"

"Possibly Don Diego Vega cannot," Bardoso admitted, almost closing his good eye. "But Señor Zorro can!"

Chapter Two
Certain Plans Are Made

DON DIEGO Vega was about to brush his handkerchief across his nostrils again as Bardoso spoke, but his hand stopped abruptly half way to his face. Into that face came a queer expression, and the eyes opened wider, and Don Diego drew in his breath sharply. But immediately he was master of himself again.

"Señor Zorro?" he questioned. "Ah, yes! He is the rogue lately come to these parts, whom men call the Curse of Capistrano; who puts a mask over his face and rides abroad on a big black horse."

"And rights the wrongs of the oppressed," Bardoso added. "Defends the natives against cruel masters. Whips those who abuse the robed Franciscans. Takes his blade and carves the letter Z on the faces of rogues he encounters, that all men may know he has met and punished them. Señor Zorro–The Fox–may he live long and prosper!"

"You appear to admire the fellow," Don Diego said, smiling slightly.

"He is a man." Bardoso replied, "though there be some who seem to doubt it. A man after my own heart!" The reformed and retired pirate stepped a bit closer, but not on the windward side, and lowered his voice as he continued: "Some things are known to me, Don Diego. Jose, the chief of the Cocopahs, is my friend and brother. What secrets I hold in my breast, hot irons could not tear out of me."

"I thank you, good Bardoso."

"Regarding this Marcos Lopez, this card cheat, things are as I have told you. He was sent here by the Governor, to ruin young caballeros and so shame their families. And Capitán Torello, of the presidio, aids and abets him. Was it not

Capitán Torello who introduced him around?"

"I believe so," Don Diego said.

"And does not the rogue conduct his crooked game in the barracks room at times?"

"So you say. But I am more interested in the affairs of my friend, Don Carlos Cassara. He has told me nothing of this."

"Perhaps he is too proud to do so," Bardoso replied. "Some men do not like to speak of their follies. This Marcos Lopez has bills of honor against Don Carlos for large sums, all won through cheating. The rogue cannot play an honest game. It has been in my mind to carve him with my cutlass, but I have no chance at him. Such as I cannot dice with him, accuse him of cheating, grow angry and pick a quarrel that would end in his undoing. He will have none of me. I offend his nostrils."

"No doubt," Don Diego agreed.

"As to this Señor Zorro–he should be warned also. It is my understanding that Capitán Torello believes he knows the identity of the man. He and his soldiers watch, to trap him. The capitán thinks that Señor Zorro is a young man of quality seeking adventure. And were he to be caught and hanged, another proud family of the Southland would be humbled, and the Governor have cause for rejoicing."

Don Diego smiled a bit. "Perhaps Señor Zorro knows that he is being watched," he said. "Have done, Bardoso! Your many words tire me. I must be on my way. Señor a' Dios!"

Bardoso bowed, and returned to his bench in the shade beside the adobe hut, and reached for his wine jug. His one good eye was sparkling as he lifted the jug and took a deep drink. Bardoso could read men after a fashion.

THE idle Don Diego Vega continued his tour of the plaza, bowing to the dainty señoritas and their mothers, waving a hand languidly at men he knew. He neared the inn, into which he seldom ventured. But upon this particular afternoon he decided to honor the establishment with his presence.

From the blazing sun of the plaza, he stepped into the cool, semi-dark interior of the inn, into a big, low-ceilinged room redolent with odors of food and drink. The fat landlord hurried forward, smirking and bowing, gesturing toward a bench beside a table.

But Don Diego waved the landlord aside, and went on down the room, past benches where merchants and soldiers, caballeros and rogues, strangers and townsmen ate and drank, saluting some and ignoring others.

Marcos Lopez had a gaming table beneath a window at the far end of the room. Men were dicing there now, and Don Carlos Cassara was one. That Don Carlos was losing, there could be little doubt. His pale face, and eyes too bright, told the story of strain and intense excitement.

The eyes of Marcos Lopez glowed when he saw Don Diego Vega approach. Here was a proper young blood to get into the game! He had wealth, and position unquestioned. And Capitán Torello had whispered to the gambler some suspicions regarding him. Here was a big fish for the net!

"Make way, there, for Don Diego Vega!" Lopez commanded. He bowed and smiled. "Welcome to my poor game, Don Diego. You'll try your fortune with the dice?"

Don Diego looked at him, through him, without speaking, and the face of Marcos Lopez grew red with wrath. Don Diego, it appeared, did not intend to play, but had come into the inn to find his friend. He slapped Don Carlos familiarly on the shoulder, and drew him aside, and the game was continued with the others playing.

Beside the wall in the corner they stood side by side, the two young caballeros, garbed in the finery of the hour. About twenty-five they were, scions of noble families, proud and haughty, secure in the positions they held in the world.

"How goes it with you, my friend?" Don Diego asked.

"As usual."

"That remark may have one of several meanings. We have not seen much of you lately," Don Diego rebuked. "You are looking tired and ill. Suppose we take horse tomorrow, and ride out to my father's hacienda. The country air will benefit you."

"Though it would please me, I cannot," Don Carlos replied. "There are things I must do."

"It is a delicate subject, and I hesitate to speak of it even to you, my friend," Don Diego said. "But–is it possible that you have been losing heavily to this fellow?"

"It is true that the dice and cards both have been running against me."

"A man may take his chances with dice and cards," Don Diego observed, "when they are han-

dled fairly. I have it, on good authority, he is a cheat."

"A cheat? Capitán Torello himself introduced him, vouched for him."

"Quite true!" Don Diego admitted. "There is also a meaning behind that, I understand. They are cousins in intrigue. The man would ruin you and shame your family–as he ruined and shamed men in Santa Barbara, much to the delight of the Governor."

"There is a plot to do so? Then, indeed, I am ruined," Don Carlos declared. "The man holds my promises to pay. I have been trying to win them back, and have been only losing more. There is but one way out–the caballero's way."

"The coward's way," Don Diego corrected. "Let us have no thought of that! Give me your promise!"

"I cannot!"

"At least, promise me this–that you'll dice no more, play at cards no more, and do nothing to hurt yourself until this time tomorrow."

"And what will that avail, my friend? The fever is upon me. If you are thinking of paying my debts–"

"Would that not be an act of friendship?"

"I could not allow it, Don Diego, could not endure it. To take such a sum from you–"

"Easy!" Don Diego cautioned. "You need not humble your pride. Did I speak of money? There are several ways of paying debts, my friend. Your promise?"

"You have it!" Don Carlos Cassara bowed.

"I thank you," Don Diego said. "Now you are to leave the inn, as though in answer to some message I brought. And keep away from Marcos Lopez's table tonight."

"You are leaving with me?"

"I watch the game for a time," Don Diego said. "Perhaps I shall play for a moment."

"He will get you in his clutches."

"Have no fear of that," Don Diego said. "Get you gone!"

DON Carlos hurried from the inn, as though to keep an appointment, and Don Diego drifted back to the gaming table and watched the play. And presently he took a money pouch from his girdle, and extracted a handful of coins from it, at which the eyes of Marcos Lopez sparkled. Only get him started, Lopez thought! The fever soon would claim him.

Don Diego played for the space of half an hour, first with the dice and then with the cards, winning at times and losing at other times, Marcos Lopez allowing him to keep about even in an effort to whet his interest.

Don Diego watched carefully, and saw what he had expected to see. Marcos Lopez could do with cards or dice as he willed. There was no doubt that the fellow was a cheat.

"Perhaps a larger stake some time?" Don Diego suggested.

"At your pleasure, Don Diego." Marcos Lopez bowed courteously. "I hold my game this evening at the presidio. Come you there, if it please you."

"At the presidio?" Don Diego lifted his brows. "You are expecting me to play with common soldiers?"

"Not so, Señor. Capitán Torello is my good friend. He loves to play. And there undoubtedly will be some others, gentlemen of blood and station."

"Perhaps," Don Diego said.

He brushed his handkerchief across nostrils and went forth into the plaza again, languidly, and once outside he used the handkerchief to rub his hands briskly, as though rubbing away some sort of stain. For he had handled the same dice and cards that this Marcos Lopez had handled.

At the presidio! In the midst of Capitán Torello's troopers! There would be a rare place for Señor Zorro to strike!

Don Diego strolled around the border of the plaza and toward his home. He walked slowly, with head proudly erect, looking into the face of the setting sun, every inch a caballero.

Near one of the stores loitered a group of natives, one of them much taller and larger than the rest. This was José, the chief of the Cocopahs. All backed away and bowed as Don Diego passed. And Don Diego–careless of him–dropped his handkerchief.

José of the Cocopahs glided forward like a shadow, picked up the dainty handkerchief, ran

after Don Diego, half knelt before him, and proffered it.

"Have it for yourself," Don Diego said, waving the man aside. Then, in lower tones: "Zorro rides tonight!"

Chapter Three
Zorro Plays A Trick

THAT night a myriad of stars studded a clear sky, but there was no moon. It was spring, and the natives were courting and mating, and some not natives were doing the same and old men were out walking and looking at the stars and dreaming of the time when they had been young. So one wishing to pass unseen would have to be cautious, since almost every dark corner held a witness.

Don Diego, having dined with his father, retired to his own quarters on the second floor of the casa, and his father went to spend the evening with a friend. Don Diego perused a tome of poetry for a time, and then clapped his hands, and his personal servant entered.

This native was named Bernardo, and he was a jewel of a body servant, for he could hear orders but could not speak, being dumb.

"Zorro rides," Don Diego said.

Bernardo bowed and smiled, and backed out of the room. A moment later Don Diego followed. He went through a passage and up a flight of steps which led to the roof. But he did not go on to the roof, but passed through a panel in the wall, descended another flight of steps, and finally came to a small room beneath the ground.

Bernardo was there. Don Diego divested himself of his embroidered dressing gown and his other apparel, and dressed as Señor Zorro always dressed, putting on thin black gloves and his black mask as a finishing touch. From a peg in the wall he took down the sword of Zorro, an excellent blade, but a bit heavier than a rapier, and buckled it on.

Then Bernardo went ahead through a narrow passage and opened a door, and Señor Zorro–Don Diego Vega no longer–passed forth into the night, emerging near the well in the patio.

He wrapped his cloak around him, up to his ears, after the manner of some man wishing to avoid recognition as he went to keep tryst. Keeping in the deeper shadows as much as possible, he crept away from the house, got behind the huts of the servants, and fared forth.

At the edge of the pueblo there was a depression in the earth, made years ago by a torrential rain, around which brush grew–a spot avoided by all as worthless. Señor Zorro crept to the edge and gave a peculiar whistle, so low that it could not be heard more than a score of feet away.

It was answered, and José of the Cocopahs crept out of the darkness and to his side.

"The horse is ready?" Zorro asked.

"Ready, master."

"Attend me, while I give you orders," Zorro instructed.

He spoke rapidly and at length. Then he crawled from the depression, wrapped his cloak around him again, and walked back toward the buildings of the pueblo. Jose, on a horse which was not that of Señor Zorro, followed cautiously at a distance.

BY A circuitous route, Zorro approached the inn. On the dark side of the building he went forward until he was against the wall, and could creep along it to the nearest open window. Beneath the window he crouched and listened, ascertaining the number and quality of those inside.

Then he went to the rear of the building, where the door of the kitchen stood open, with odors of roasting meat wafting forth into the night air to agonize the stomachs of such natives as had not eaten recently.

Two natives were there, working among the pots and pans, but Zorro wished nothing with them. He waited until the fat landlord came into the kitchen, until he was busy berating one of the servants for some fault, and then slipped inside, and got between the landlord and the door of the big room, there to stand with his arms folded across his chest, and a pistol held in his right hand.

The fat landlord turned, in time, and saw him, and turned gray and gasped. One of the natives gave a screech of fear, and the other seemed stricken dumb.

"Let there be no noise!" Zorro commanded, using a deep monotone when he spoke. "Landlord, come you here to me! The men will remain as they are."

The servants cringed against the wall, yet they did not seem to be much afraid, knowing that Señor Zorro always had befriended them. The

quaking landlord, wringing his hands, hobbled forward as though his legs scarcely would carry him.

"You know me?" Zorro asked.

"If you are a highwayman–"

"I am Zorro!"

"Ah!" The fat landlord dropped to his knees and lifted his hands in earnest supplication. "I have done nothing, good Señor Zorro. Do not mark me with your blade. Do not put bullet through my body."

"Silence your tongue!" Zorro ordered. "Obey me, and you have nothing to fear."

"Command me, Señor Zorro!"

"This Marcos Lopez, the gambler, lives in a room off your patio, does he not?"

"It is so, Señor."

"Conduct me to his room. Be cautious about it. If you try to play me false, one thrust of my blade, one shot from this pistol–"

"It shall be as you wish, Señor Zorro."

"And quickly!" Zorro added, turning toward the door.

The landlord opened the door, and they went into the patio, where the shadows were deep and there was no light save one tallow pot which only served to cast uncertain streaks of illumination. Past the bubbling fountain they went, and toward the end of the patio, and there the landlord stopped in front of a door.

"Open it, and enter," Zorro said.

They went inside, and at Zorro's order the landlord lighted a candle. The room was small, and contained little beyond a cot and night coverings. There was a small traveling box of wood, which was unfastened.

Zorro lifted the lid of the box and examined the contents, clothing for the greater part. He examined the cot and the coverings, tapped around the walls, while the landlord stood in the doorway and shivered, and wondered whether Zorro would blame him if somebody happened into the patio and discovered his presence.

Zorro had not found what he sought. He extinguished the candle and stood beside the landlord outside the door of the room.

"Where does this Marcos Lopez keep his papers?" Zorro asked.

"He has a pouch, señor, which he carries attached to his belt. It is a pouch of fine leather–"

"Enough! I care not of what it is made. Its contents are my chief concern. Lead the way back into the inn."

"Would you crave a portion of roast mutton, beef, or a cup of my choicest wine, Señor Zorro?"

"I crave your silence only–and do not mention my name aloud again," Zorro told him.

"Some day, I shall punish you, when I get around to it. To men in their cups, you sell wine mixed with water, and charge them for the real article. Your nimble fingers often make mistakes when you are changing coins. You purchase mutton stolen by native thieves from haciendas–"

"Have mercy, señor! I shall mend my ways."

"See that you do so. That were easier than mending a slit in your fat belly," Zorro said. "Into the inn!"

THEY went into the kitchen, where the affrighted servants were still cringing against the walls.

"On with your work!" Zorro commanded them. And then, to the landlord: "We go into the big room, and you will serve me wine."

"Señor! A dozen men are there, including Sergeant Pedro Gonzales of the soldiery."

"I know it. I listened at a window," Zorro admitted. "Do as I tell you. Open the door!"

The landlord opened the door, and Zorro strode into the dimly lighted room and sat on a bench beside one of the tables. The frantic landlord put a cup of wine before him, and he drank.

Sergeant Pedro Gonzales was sprawled on a bench, boasting as usual. He did not notice the presence of Zorro, nor did any of the others. Some were listening to the wild tales of the sergeant, and others were playing cards at a table on the far side of the room, and still others were half stupefied with the wine they had taken.

Zorro quaffed his wine, while the landlord stood by ready to fill the cup again. But Zorro waved him aside, got to his feet, hurled the wine cup across the room to strike beside the bench whereon Sergeant Gonzales sat, and laughed.

Every man in the room turned his way. Every man lurched to his feet and started forward.

"It is a masked highwayman!" somebody shouted.

"It is Zorro!" another cried.

"At him!" Gonzales bellowed, whipping out his blade. "Let us take him! There is a reward–"

One of the troopers nearest the door bolted through it and into the plaza, shouting that Zorro was at the inn, and rushing on toward the presidio

with this intelligence. Others took up the cry, until it rang around the plaza and startled half the town.

Señor Zorro darted forward, still laughing, his eyes gleaming through the holes in the mask he wore. His blade crashed against that of the big sergeant, there was a quick exchange, and Gonzales found himself disarmed and his sword flying through the air to clatter to the floor.

"Back!" Zorro cried. And then he darted through the kitchen door, and was gone.

"After him! Catch me this rogue!" Gonzales bellowed. "I have said it–there is a rich reward!"

Out into the night they poured. Down the hill from the presidio came some of the troopers on their horses. Gonzales got into his own saddle, and began bellowing commands.

Away from the inn, a big black horse rushed through the night, and the eager troopers pursued.

But they pursued José of the Cocopahs, while Señor Zorro, having thus drawn the troopers away, hurried through the shadows to the depression in the earth where his own horse was waiting.

Chapter Four
Zorro Marks His Man

NOT far from the back wall of the presidio was a clump of stunted trees, and Señor Zorro reached this without discovery, dismounted, and tethered his horse.

From the far distance came sounds which told where the troopers rode in vain pursuit, and he could hear the hoarse bellowing of Sergeant Gonzales as he led them.

Leaving the trees, Zorro crept toward the building. In front of it a light burned, and several soldiers were there, looking down toward the plaza and wishing that they had been in the chase instead of here on guard.

Zorro had no intention of going to the front. He went along a wall, keeping in the deep shadows, and came to an open window through which light streamed. Through that window also came men's voices.

Crouching against the wall just outside the streak of light, Señor Zorro listened intently.

"The both of you — no pistol this time !"

Capitán Torello was there, and also Marcos Lopez, and two young caballeros Zorro knew well, were talking with them.

"This Zorro is a pest, but one day we shall have him," the capitán was saying. "I have a clue as to his identity. When he is caught he shall swing from the end of a rope for the world to see, and no doubt some persons will be surprised. For there will be no mask on his face then."

"What did he do at the inn?" one asked.

"According to the report just brought me, the fellow showed himself there, but took flight when he found my big sergeant, Gonzales, ready to do battle with him. They pursue him now, and may bring him in."

"He has interrupted our game," Marcos Lopez remarked.

"Let us play on," Capitán Torello suggested. "A highway man should not be allowed to interfere with the pleasure of gentlemen."

Señor Zorro almost chuckled at what he heard. He went back along the wall and came to a door which was without bar on the inside, due to somebody's carelessness. Through this door he entered the building, finding himself in a sort of storeroom filled with casks and tubs of supplies for the soldiery.

For a short time he listened at the wall, and then he opened another door and slipped into a corridor and along it to the entrance of the room wherein they played at cards. He could see the four around the table, in the center of which a candelabrum furnished light.

Marcos Lopez was dealing, and between him and the capitán flashed a look of understanding that Señor Zorro did not miss. The two caballeros were being victimized. They were far gone in their cups, which the capitán kept well filled. Too befuddled were they to pay close attention to the dealing.

"Never have I seen this Señor Zorro," Capitán Torello was saying. "He avoids me and my troopers. He always strikes where we are not."

"And what gains he by his work, if he does not steal?" Marcos Lopez asked.

" 'Tis the adventure he seeks," the capitán declared. "To befriend the oppressed, he gives out. But he upsets order, hence his excellency has of-

fered a reward. When first I set my eyes on this Señor Zorro, I claim it!"

"You have your opportunity, señor!" rang out a voice at the door.

ZORRO had slipped inside the room, closed the door behind him, put the heavy bar up in place. And now he stood before it, menacing them with his pistol. Torello and Marcos Lopez sprang to their feet, and the two caballeros gasped and stared at him, but remained seated.

"Steady, señores!" Zorro warned. "Make no violent move, else somebody dies."

"Zorro!" Torello gasped.

"The same. Are you about to claim the reward, my capitán?"

"For this insolence–" Torello began.

"Spare me your threats," Zorro snapped in interruption. "You are but a monkey in uniform, a worthy satellite for a licentious Governor."

"Treason!" Torello cried.

"Make the most of it," Zorro told him.

"What do you do here? Have you come to assassinate us?" the capitán asked.

"I am no assassin," Zorro said. "You recently remarked that I crave adventure. What better thrill than to come here, with mask on my face and your troopers near, and have a game of cards and a fling of dice? Seldom do I get into a game. I would try my luck with Señor Lopez."

"You would play with me?" Lopez cried, nervously, licking at his lips as though they suddenly were parched.

"Why not? I am not particular, señor. I have funds with me. It will, perhaps, be a thrill for us both."

One of the caballeros seemed to realize what was happening. "Have at him!" he cried, trying to lurch to his feet, and trying to draw his sword.

"Steady!" Zorro snapped at him. "Sit back against the wall, you two, with your arms folded."

"No thief can tell me–" the other began.

"Silence!" Zorro cried. "You are taking orders from me now. Put your stools against the wall, and sit there and be quiet. You may enjoy the show Capitán Torello, you'll sit beside them. My game is with this Señor Lopez."

"You order around your betters as though they were scum," the capitán complained. "Or, perhaps they are not your betters, eh?"

"No man is!"

"Perhaps your own blood is blue–" the capitán hinted.

"No man yet has been able to let out enough that such may be ascertained."

Capitán Torello retired to the wall, placing a stool beside it and sitting down, urging the caballeros to do the same. The capitán was noticing things, even in the flickering and uncertain light that came from the candelabrum. Behind the left ear of the masked man, and a little down, he saw a sizable wart. He would remember that!

Señor Zorro advanced to the gaming, while the capitán watched every move he made, striving to identify. Lopez had sat down again.

"Why not seize this rogue?" one of the caballeros was asking Torello. "You are a soldier, are you not, señor?"

"Let us wait–and watch," the capitán begged. "Perhaps there is a plan in my mind."

LOPEZ looked across the table. "What sort of game do you wish, señor?" he asked.

Upon the table, Zorro tossed a pouch which clinked as it struck. He waved his left hand toward it, retaining the pistol in his right.

"Count it, and match it," he said.

Lopez opened the pouch, and his eye bulged at what he saw. He counted the gold rapidly.

"I have not this much with me, señor," he said. "I am but a poor man."

"How much can you cover?"

"Perhaps the half of it."

"Cover the half, then," Zorro directed. "And for the other half throw upon the table the leather pouch you wear on your belt."

"This pouch? No gold is in it, señor–only papers."

"I am aware of that," Zorro told him.

"They are promises to pay, señor, and, if you won, you probably would have difficulty collecting."

"Do you expect to have difficulty?" Zorro asked. "I can collect as readily as you. Perhaps I know the contents of the pouch, señor! Perhaps it would give me pleasure to collect the promises to pay, knowing who wrote them for you."

"Ha! An enemy of his, are you?"

"Enough of this prattle!" Zorro said. "Cover my bet, with your gold and the pouch. I am in a fever to play."

Watching him carefully, Marcos Lopez put out gold, and counted it, and made a little pile of it beside Zorro's. Then he tossed the pouch upon

the table.

"I wish to be sure of its contents, since I am matching them with gold," Zorro told him. "Expose them."

Lopez opened the pouch and revealed a sheaf of documents, upon some of which Zorro saw the signature of Don Carlos Cassara.

"It is well," he said. "Return them to the pouch, and the gold also, and let us play."

"And what sort of game does the señor desire?" Lopez asked. "The dice, or cards?"

"Cards," Zorro told him. "But–a moment! Attend me, caballeros, as I speak. This man, this Marcos Lopez, is a cheat."

"How is this?" Lopez cried.

"Be quiet!" Zorro warned, lifting the muzzle of the pistol a bit. "And keep your hands flat on the table in front of you. Yes, señor, you are a cheat! You were sent here by the Governor to ruin men. You ruined several near Santa Barbara. You get young caballeros filled with wine, and rob them. You do not know how to play an honest game."

"Prove that, Zorro, and I run him through!" one of the victims cried.

"Stay as you are, señor! This is my affair. When I am done with this fellow, you may have what is left of him. Not only is he a common cheat, but Capitán Torello knows it, and aids him. Like flies to the web of the spider you have drifted–"

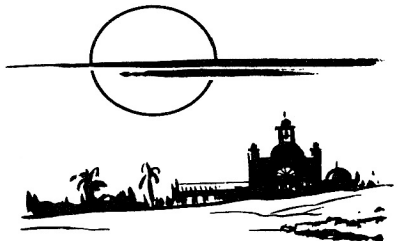
"For this–" Torello began, starting to his feet.

But Zorro threatened him with the pistol, and he subsided. Marcos Lopez was pale, nervous, trembling. His eyes bulged, and his lips were quivering.

"Shuffle the pack," Zorro ordered him. "And use caution, señor, as you do so. I know every trick that may be done with cards."

Lopez shuffled, cut, and shuffled again, and put the pack in the middle of the table.

"You will deal me the fifth card, face down," Zorro directed, "and take the tenth for yourself. It will be a quick game of high cards, and a simple one. At it, señor!"



WITH trembling fingers, Lopez slowly counted off the cards, tossed one in front of Zorro, and retained the tenth for himself. Zorro's eyes were glittering at him through the holes in the mask. They seemed to be threatening torture and death. Lopez wondered at the identity of this man, as did Capitán Torello–and the latter was not forgetting the wart behind the ear. He had suspected Don Diego Vega of being Señor Zorro, and never had he noticed whether Don Diego had such a wart. He would make sure when next he saw him.

"Well, señor?" Lopez was saying.

"We have not yet seen our cards. You have dealt, señor, no doubt anticipating that I would say the high card is to win. Such would be the usual game, eh, señor? One moment."

Zorro suddenly whipped out his dagger, it flashed through the light, and the card Lopez had dealt himself was transfixed and so fastened to the table.

"What is this?" Lopez cried.

"We now announce the game, señor," Zorro said. "The high card loses, Señor Gambler." Watching them all, he picked up his own card, made swift glance at it, then flipped it over upon the table, face up.

"We have here an eight," he said. "And what did you deal yourself, señor, under the anticipation that the high card would have merit?"

"Why, I–I do not know, señor, not having looked at it."

"Did I have the time to spend, and the inclination to spend it, I would make another wager that, whatever it is, the card is in excess of an eight. Withdraw my dagger and toss it across the table to me, and then expose the card."

Zorro held his wrist on the edge of the table, so that the muzzle of the pistol covered Lopez's heart.

"You are being unfair–" Torello began.

"Unfair?" Zorro laughed. "And what is this man, I ask you? Is he not a common cheat? Does he give men a chance for their money? Señor Lopez, expose the card."

Lopez licked at his dry lips again, and again his hand trembled. He withdrew the dagger and tossed it to Zorro, picked up the card slowly and turned it over.

"A knave!" Zorro cried. "As I thought, Señor Cheat. You dealt yourself an excellent card–had the game been the reverse." He got to his feet,

gathered up the pouches and stowed them away, and stepped back. "It has been a great game," he added. "It desolates me that I cannot remain and play for a longer time with you. But I fear the capitán's troopers will be returning from their senseless chase, and I have no wish to do battle with them all."

"Then do battle with one–with me," Torello cried.

"This is not my night to deal with you," Zorro said. "That may come later. This is my night to deal with Señor Lopez, the swindler who ruins men. Draw your blade, Lopez!"

NOW it happened that Marcos Lopez fancied himself as a swordsman. His rapier had been removed when the gambling began that evening, and was on the end of the long table. Now he sprang up and back, a bellow of rage rumbling from his throat, and whipped out the blade.

Zorro transferred his pistol to his left hand, and drew with his right, and placed himself on guard.

"You others will remain against the wall," he ordered. "If not, my weapon shall speak. This is to be a fair combat, though Marcos Lopez is not used to fairness."

Then they were at it, with Zorro compelled to glance now and then toward Capitán Torello, to make certain that he did not try a foul attack and rush to the aid of his confederate. And Marcos Lopez found, in the first few seconds of sword-play, that he knew nothing at all of handling a blade as compared to Señor Zorro. There came an instant when he felt a sting on his cheek, felt a trickle of blood run warmly down toward his throat.

"There is the top bar of my mark–the letter Z–señor," Zorro said. "Three times I shall strike, and the letter then will be completed. And all men shall know that you have met me and been punished for some fault."

"Demon!" Lopez cried, and made a furious attack.

Zorro retreated and guarded well while the other's fury expended itself without effect, and then Lopez felt another burning sting on his cheek.

"The slant of the Z," Zorro told him. "But one stroke remains, señor." He continued to talk as he fought. "Then, get you gone from Reina de Los Angeles! Turn your nose north, señor, and follow it back to the Governor!"

Capitán Torello had edged along the wall to the open window, looked out, and saw some of his men returning from the fruitless chase. He bellowed out into the night.

"Gonzales! Troopers! To me! Zorro is here!"

A chorus of cries answered him, and hoofs pounded the hard earth.

Zorro retreated swiftly to the barred door. Torello started toward him.

"Back!" Zorro thundered, lifting the pistol again.

"Throw the gun aside, and try it," Torello begged.

"The odds are too great, señor. I must retire. I cannot fight an army. And I have not finished the Z on your face, Señor Lopez. But that perhaps shall be done before dawn. Get you to the inn, get your belongings, and leave Reina de Los Angeles!"

Zorro unbarred the door, pulled it open, and dashed out into the corridor. Toward the rear of the building he ran, with Torello bellowing orders, and Lopez crying for help, and the two befuddled caballeros joining in.

Led by Sergeant Gonzales, the troopers rushed into the presidio, through it, some returning to mount again.

Zorro sped through the night to the grove of trees, and they saw him and gave chase over the uneven ground. Out of the trees a big horse dashed, a figure stretched along its neck. Once more, the troopers gave chase.

And once more they chased José of the Cocopahs, as he rode wildly and led them away from Señor Zorro, who stood beside his own horse in the grove of stunted trees and watched.

Chapter Five
Concerning A Wart

ZORRO waited for a time, until the noise of the chase had died away, then got into his saddle and rode by a circuitous route through the darkness and back to the vicinity of the inn. He put his horse once more in the depression, where José later would find him and take him away. Then, afoot, he went toward the inn once more, cautious and alert.

And once more he crouched beneath a window to listen to what was being said inside. Men were talking of Zorro and the chase, some hoping that he would be captured and others that he would get free of the soldiery. Some trooper from the presidio was there already, sure of free wine since he brought news.

"Marcos Lopez, the gambler, has two-thirds of the mark of Zorro on his face," the man related. "This Zorro came into the presidio, and gambled with Lopez, and beat him. Then they fought. He proved Lopez a cheat, 'tis said, and ordered him to leave Reina de Los Angeles."

"It occurs to me that the man had rare good luck with cards and the dice," some caballero put in. "A cheat, is he? Unless he obeys this Zorro's order, we shall deal with him ourselves, scum though he be."

"He is coming to the inn," the trooper continued. "He was washing the blood from his face when I left. And Capitán Torello will be coming with him, to learn if there is any news here. The capitán is hot to catch him, this Zorro."

"He has been hot for it for some time," another remarked, "but there have been no results."

There was a tumult in front of the inn, and Zorro risked standing back and lifting his head and peering through the low window. He saw Marcos Lopez enter through the front door, with Torello at his side.

And he saw his friend, Don Carlos Cassara, sitting at one of the tables with wine cup before him, drinking to excess as he brooded on his folly. He glared at the gambler, but made no move.

"Wine!" Torello was shouting at the fat landlord. "Sit you down here, Lopez. My troopers shall catch this rogue, and you'll see him hanged. A rare spectacle that, eh? And perhaps some will be surprised when they see the face behind the mask."

"If he had not held a pistol–" Lopez said.

"He is a ready man with a blade, that one, and there can be no denying it," the capitán put in. "It is no disgrace to be beaten at swordplay by Zorro. As for the mark on your face–it will heal."

"And leave a scar."

"He did not finish the mark. The scar will be a thing of distinction. You can tell the señoritas that you got it in a duel while defending some fair lady's honor. It will attract attention to you, and mayhap win you preference over others. There is something romantic about a scar on the face."

"This hurts like the devil," Lopez said, as he sat down on a bench and reached for the mug of wine the landlord placed at his elbow. "How comes it that this Zorro has not been captured before?"

"He is aided by the natives, and sometimes, I believe, by the frailes of the missions. They hide him, no doubt, when he is hard pressed. But we'll have him yet!"

CERTAIN natives at that moment were gathering near the public corral on the side of the plaza, slipping like shadows through the starlit night, acting under José's orders.

José himself had eluded the troopers again, and had circled to return to the pueblo, where he rode his horse to the neighborhood of the inn. There, another man met him, and carried his commands to those near the corral.

And suddenly there was a tumult, shouts and screeches and groans. Men rushed from the inn to learn the cause of the commotion. But Lopez and Torello remained, as did also Don Carlos Cassara.

Zorro slipped to the kitchen door and through it, waited until the landlord entered for more wine, thrust the man aside, and strode into the big room.

"I have come to finish my letter!" he said.

Marcos Lopez and the capitán sprang to their feet, whipping out their blades. Don Carlos Cassara stirred and looked up with sudden interest.

"The both of you–and no pistol this time," Zorro said. "Let us have an end of it."

Together they advanced upon him, while Zorro took station in a corner of the room near the end of the big fireplace. Then began swift swordplay. Advancing, retreating, lunging, cutting, panting with heavy breath, they fought, while the others rushed across the plaza to where the natives were conducting their disconcerting demonstra-

Capitán Torello thought he saw an opportunity, and went in, and went out again with blood gushing from a wound in his right shoulder. His sword clattered to the floor, and the capitán sank upon one of the benches, groaning with the pain of his wound.

Marcos Lopez, fear suddenly heavy upon him, now that he fought alone, retreated, with Zorro following. The gambler's face was gray save where it was inflamed by the wound Zorro had made at the presidio.

"I finish the letter!" Zorro cried, and his blade darted in like the tongue of a serpent, brought a streak of fire to the gambler's cheek. " 'Tis finished! You bear my brand, Señor Cheat!"

Now Lopez became as a madman. He retreated to the wall, still fighting, almost stumbling over the feet of Don Carlos Cassara, whom he seemed to see for the first time.

"At the rogue, Don Carlos!" he cried. "Get him for me! There is a reward for this highwayman! Get him–and I hand you back all your promises to pay!"

Don Carlos lurched to his feet, his blade coming from its scabbard. What was in his mind, he scarcely knew, save that he yearned to fight. He engaged furiously, as Lopez fell back and gave him room.

Don Carlos was good with the blade, as Señor Zorro knew well, having fenced with him on a thousand occasions. And Zorro knew also that Don Carlos was not himself now, did not realize what he was doing, and certainly did not recognize him.

Zorro retreated in front of the fireplace, backing toward the kitchen door. Torello remained on his bench, Lopez kept in the background, and the fat landlord cringed against a wall, shivering with fright.

And so Zorro, pretending to retreat before the furious onslaught of Don Carlos, got some distance from them, where he could speak without being overheard.

He advanced as though to an attack, and for an instant the swords were locked to the hilt.

"Carlos, my friend! Easy! Do you not know me? It is Diego!" he hissed.

The light of understanding came into the face of Don Carlos Cassara and an appreciation of the situation.

"Lopez lied! I have your papers. I got them from him in the presidio. Fight on–pretend!"

"Disarm me," Carlos whispered, as they clashed again.

AN INSTANT later, Don Carlos's sword went spinning through the air and crashed to the floor in a far corner of the room, and Don Carlos reeled back against the wall. And Señor Zorro laughed loudly and waved his blade at them, and darted into the kitchen.

Capitán Torello was on his feet instantly, shouting. The landlord rushed to the front door and out into the night, screeching for men to come. Marcos Lopez, holding hand to bloody cheek, added his cries to the din. Don Carlos Cassara lurched in front of the kitchen door, to deter any who would pursue.

Sergeant Gonzales and the troopers returned at that instant. Once more, for the third time that night they chased a big horse that was ridden furiously away from the place–chased José of the Cocopahs, who bestrode a piece of horseflesh no trooper's mount could catch. Guns spoke, and bullets whistled, and hoofs pounded, and back through the din came a mocking laugh.

"Gonzales–Sergeant!" Torello roared.

"My capitán!"

"Recall your men. Have the trumpeter sound! Surround the town house of Don Alejandro Vega, Don Diego's father! Quickly, my man!"

"I fail to understand–"

"Obey, do it! I shall be there presently."

In the darkness at the end of the inn, Señor Zorro heard the words. Now a fear came to him, not for himself, but for his father's and family's good name. It was one thing to ride as Zorro and right wrongs. It could be quite another to be captured and tried by court-martial as a highwayman, and possibly hanged. And he knew that he could expect no mercy from the Governor's man.

Torello suspected him, as Zorro had known for some time. He had been watched. And now the capitán was ordering the house surrounded, thinking that Zorro had ridden away, and would be coming back quietly to enter his father's casa.

Through the night Zorro fled afoot, while some of the soldiers already rode furiously toward the house, with big Sergeant Gonzales barking his orders at them.

"Come with me, Lopez ," Torello said, in a low voice. "This may be our great night. If things are as I think, we shall receive rare thanks from his excellency. The son of Don Alejandro

Vega, haughty don! Ha! To see him dance at the end of a rope–!"

"A sight that would gladden my eyes. I am marked for life," Lopez said.

" 'Tis the fortunes of war. You are not the only one who bears a wound."

"But yours is in the shoulder, and the scar will be covered by your uniform," Lopez complained.

They went across the plaza toward the Vega house. Half the doors in town were open, and servants ran about, seeking to learn news and take it back to their masters. Señor Zorro was compelled to exercise great caution as he made his way toward his home. The mask remained on his face. His pistol had been tucked into his sash, but his blade was ready in his hand.

DON Carlos Cassara had heard Torello's words, and a great fear for his friend came upon him. Don Diego had done this for him, he knew. And if the house was surrounded, with Diego out of it, and being forced to return wearing the garb of Zorro, there could be but one end.

Don Carlos hurried after the capitán.

"Señor, you go too far," he said. "If you thus affront Don Alejandro Vega, you had best send in your resignation–if you live to write it."

"I do not need you to tell me my duty, señor."

"Somebody should," Don Carlos observed. "A capitán who aids and abets a gambling cheat–"

"What is this?" Torello raged. Then a crafty expression came into his face. "I understand, and it verifies my suspicions," he added. "You are perhaps trying to entice me into a fight, that matters may be delayed. I shall attend to you later, señor! Just now, I have work to do."

The capitán hurried on, shouting to the sergeant, and the troopers rushed toward the Vega house to surround it, dismounting and taking up positions of advantage in the front and rear, and to either side.

Señor Zorro had gone on through the night, avoiding those in the plaza and careful not to be seen. He went to the rear of his father's house, and so to the well in the patio. A moment later, Bernardo had let him in.

"Make haste!" Zorro snapped.

They ascended the steps and came to the hidden room, and there Señor Zorro stripped himself of mask and gloves, blade and costume, while Bernardo helped him. Swiftly, he dressed as he had been earlier in the evening, even to the flowered dressing gown. He wiped the perspiration from his face, straightened his hair, fought to compose his breathing, that it might seem normal.

Up through the house he went, and to his own quarters on the second floor. As he picked up the tome of poetry and sank into an upholstered chair, there was a furious pounding below at the front door.

The pounding was repeated, and there were shouted demands for recognition. Don Alejandro Vega, his white hair bristling with anger, stalked down the wide tiled stairs and to the immense living room, bellowing for servants.

Natives scurried to his side and got orders. Candelabra were lighted. Don Alejandro stalked on to the front door, with a servant at his side.

"Open!" Don Alejandro commanded.

The man took down a metal bar, affixed a chain which would allow the heavy door to come open for the space of a foot, and pulled it back. In the candlelight, Don Alejandro Vega stood there as angry as he was proud.

"What is all this tumult around a gentleman's house?" he demanded, in stentorian tones. "Shall I have my servants whip you, scum?" Then he saw Capitán Torello. "Ha! So you are with them," he added. "Perhaps you can explain, Señor Capitán."

"I would see you alone, Don Alejandro."

"Enter!"

DON Alejandro motioned to the servant, who took down the chain and pulled the door open wider. Torello stepped through, with Marcos Lopez at his heels.

"And who is this?" Don Alejandro asked.

"A friend of mine."

"You have queer friends, capitán. If I mistake not, he is the common gambler who has been playing in the pueblo recently. My house is not for such."

"This is an investigation, Don Alejandro, and he is a witness."

"That entirely alters the situation. Enter!"

The door was closed.

"Now, capitán, I demand an explanation," Don Alejandro said. "And it had best be an excellent one."

"Señor Zorro has been abroad again," Torello said.

"That is none of my affair."

"Perhaps it is, señor. Just now, I wish to see

Don Diego, your son. He is home?"

"As far as I know, he is in his room," Don Alejandro said.

"Will you make sure, señor?"

Don Alejandro glared at him, clapped his hands, and another servant entered.

"My compliments to my son, and ask him to be kind enough to visit me here immediately," Don Alejandro said. "Be seated, señores, and I'll have wine served you."

"We have no time for wine, and this is not a visit of courtesy," Capitán Torello said. "Frankly, Don Alejandro, I suspect your son of being this Señor Zorro."

Consternation flooded Don Alejandro's face for an instant, and then he threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"Some men have no brains at all," he observed. "My son? Playing at being Zorro? I wish to Heaven that were true. My son, it happens, does not care for such things as furious riding, fighting with a blade, indulging in violent sports. The whole world knows how it irks me that this is so. I wish he were this Zorro! My old heart would rejoice, for Zorro has done some wonderful things."

"Nevertheless, I am waiting to see your son," Torello said.

"Here he is, señor!"

Don Diego Vega came slowly down the stairs, trailing his flowered dressing gown, the tome of poetry beneath his left arm, his right hand politely stifling a yawn. He reached the bottom and moved languidly across the big room.

"You wished to see me, my father?" he asked. He glanced at the two others as though he never had seen them before.

"It is I who wished to see you, Don Diego Vega," Capitán Torello said. "May I ask what you have been doing this evening?"

Don Diego's face broke into a soft smile. "For a time, I was on the roof, looking at the stars, and wondering," he replied. "Then I returned to my room, and read the works of the poets. I have here a verse–"

"This soldier thinks that you are Señor Zorro, who rides abroad and slashes with his blade," his father interrupted, laughing again. "Were it not so amusing, I'd have him tossed out of the house like a scurvy knave. Zorro–you? Hah!"

"One moment!" Torello said. "Allow me, Don Diego, to have a look at your neck, just behind the left ear. If there is a large wart there–"

"A wart?" Don Diego said, yawning again.

"That is almost an insult, Señor Capitán. We Vegas do not run to such blemishes as warts."

Nevertheless, Torello looked–and found no wart.

"It is an error, and I apologize," he said, retreating toward the door.

"Another such error, another bit of annoyance, and I shall take measures against you, señor!" Don Alejandro thundered. "Take yourself out of my house–and take your foul gambler friend with you!"

And so they went forth, crestfallen, and Don Carlos Cassara came in from the plaza, as though to see his friend and offer him help in case there should be trouble.

And, some minutes later, they were in Don Diego's room, the two friends, laughing and chatting, and speaking in whispers.

"There is a taint to the affair," Don Carlos declared. "I lost money to the man–"

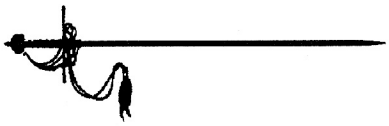
"He cheated," Don Diego interrupted. "Hence, it is not an unworthy thing to refuse to pay. And, if I mistake not, he will leave at dawn–and how can you pay him if you never see him again? Gamble no more with strangers, my friend!"

And, just before he fell asleep that night, Don Diego Vega chuckled softly. He was thinking of the matter of the wart. Certainly there was no wart on his neck. For Don Diego had removed it with the costume of Zorro–had removed the bit of wax fashioned as a wart, and placed on his neck for the special purpose of being seen.

ZORRO

Hunts A Jackal

The human jackals of Spanish California need taming,
Said the night-riding Zorro,
So–



Chapter One
"Zorro Rides Tonight!"

NOW the siesta hour was at an end in the little pueblo of Reina de Los Angeles. The cool breeze was starting to drift in from the distant sea, and again life came to the plaza. House doors were opened, and men and women came forth to go about their pursuits. Native servants scurried on errands, dealers prepared to extol the merits of their wares, and lethargy gave place to activity.

In the tavern at the corner of the plaza, there were some who still dozed as they sprawled on benches their backs against the adobe wall, mostly because of the wine they had guzzled. And some others were not dozing, notably a certain Don Diego Vega, scion of a proud and wealthy family, who had everything that a young man might desire–save spirit.

For, according to common report, this Don Diego was perfumed youth with a languid air, who seemed to find life a bore. It was whispered that he read the works of poets, shuddered at thought of blade-wielding and blood-letting, disdained to play a guitar beneath a window or flirt with a dainty señorita when her dueña was looking the other way, cared little for gaming or racing, and was about as lifeless as a man may be and still breathe and move.

Don Diego had gone to the inn in search of a friend. He had not found the friend, however, and the fat landlord was aflutter because of his visit, and servile to the point of abasement.

"A cup of rare wine, Don Diego, with my compliments?" the landlord asked.

" 'Twould be of rare vintage, no doubt, if found in this place. I have a cellar of my own, dolt!" said Don Diego. "Would I shrivel my throat with the poor stuff you sell?"

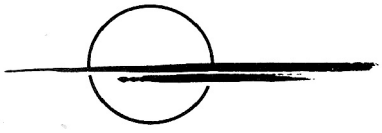
"My private stock–"

"Keep it private, and save the stomachs of men!" Don Diego interrupted. "If my good friend, Don Carlos Cassara, comes to this your vile establishment, tell him to call upon me forthwith at my father's house."

"It shall be done, Don Diego."

"And in payment for the wine which you offered me gratis, and for the insults it has pleased me to heap upon you, take this."

Don Diego tossed down a gold piece as though it had been a bit of filth, wiped his fingers with his scented lace handkerchief, yawned, and turned toward the door.



In the midst of the Stygian blackness of the night and seemingly drifting toward them,
Was the skull and chest of a skeleton

BUT there was a sudden tumult outside, at the corner of the plaza. Men began running, both whites and natives. Wild shrieks rang out, and a raucous bellowing was heard. There was the ominous *whack-whack!* of a whip striking against bare human flesh.

Don Diego Vega made a grimace of disgust, and the fat landlord hurried past him to the door, to peer out into the blazing sunshine that drenched the dusty plaza.

"It is somebody administering a beating to one of the natives, Don Diego," the tavern keeper made report.

"And is it necessary for the wretch to howl and scream as though attacked by wild beasts?"

"He is being given a sound beating with a whip, Don Diego. –Ah! The man with the whip is the strange horse dealer who came to the pueblo a few days ago. He does nothing, that man, except eat, drink, sleep, talk about horses, and beat the natives."

"A full life," Don Diego observed languidly.

"If this Señor Zorro who has been winning such fame of late would but ride the highways once more, this man might meet with proper punishment. They say that Señor Zorro is hard on ruffians who mistreat natives."

"Señor Zorro?–Ah, yes, I remember! The fellow who took it upon himself to defend the weak and oppressed. That," Don Diego said, "is quite a task!"

"It is some time since this Señor Zorro was active," the landlord recalled. "Were he here now–well, this man not only beats natives, but also is a thief."

"How is this?"

"He is a dealer in horses, and all such are swindlers, Don Diego–as doubtless you know. But this man purchases stolen animals from the natives, gives them a small part of what he promised, then compels them to dice or play at cards with him, and so wins back the little he paid–undoubtably through some trick."

"Undoubtedly," Don Diego agreed, smiling slightly.

Holding his scented handkerchief to his nostrils, Don Diego Vega stepped through the door and made bold to risk the open air. The native was still squealing, and the whip was striking home. The man who wielded it continued his raucous denunciation:

"Native dog!–Scum!–The next time I'll take off your hide in strips!–Begone!"

The whip cracked a last time, and the native gave a final screech and fled. Don Diego glanced at toward the horse trader and appraised him swiftly. The crowd melted away, and Don Diego strolled forward.

"What is all this tumult?" asked the young man.

The man with the whip whirled to face him. "Who questions–and by what right?" he demanded.

"This is Don Diego Vega, señor, a man to be treated with the utmost consideration," the landlord warned, quickly.

"Ah! Your pardon, Don Diego. I regret it if you were disturbed. I was but whipping a native cur."

"And what was his offense?"

"Such as he are a stench in my nostrils–and he was walking to windward of me."

"There are stenches and stenches," Don Diego observed. "And you, señor, are standing to windward of me." Don Diego touched his nostrils with the scented handkerchief again, and shifted his position slightly.

"What is this?" the other cried. His face turned almost purple.

"What is your name and your business?" Don Diego asked.

"I am Felipe Garzo, and I deal in horses."

"And do you also break and train the beasts, señor? That is rough work."

"It is, as you say, rough work–labor for a man of strength, Don Diego."

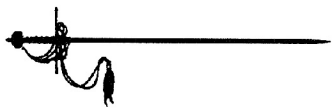
"You are buying horses here?"

"I am hoping to sell some to Capitán Torello, of the presidio, for the use of his troopers. My herdsmen even now are driving some animals north from San Juan Capistrano."

"You appear to be quite handy with the whip, señor. It is an accomplishment which may lead you into trouble," Don Diego warned. "You must have enemies scattered up and down the length of El Camino Real."

"I attend to such enemies as dare face me, señor!"

"Violence," Don Diego told him, "is something that I cannot understand. It seems such a waste of energy and time."



THEN he turned his back without another word, and started around the plaza, strolling toward a row of poor huts past which he was compelled to go to get to his father's house.

He looked ahead, and saw a man sitting on a rough bench in the shade beside a hut–a massive man with a huge paunch, with one good eye and a green patch over the empty socket of the other. He was a retired pirate–and he also pretended to be a reformed one–Bardoso by name.

This Bardoso blinked his good eye rapidly when he beheld Don Diego's approach, for Don Diego was not beyond stopping for a friendly chat. "The attraction of opposites," said the wise Franciscans.

Don Diego did slacken pace as he came near, and finally he stopped in the shade beside the hut.

"Retain your present seat on the bench, good Bardoso," Don Diego ordered. "If that jug beside you is empty, mayhap you could not rise anyhow. –I have just witnessed a disgraceful brawl on the other side of the plaza."

"I heard the disturbance, Don Diego."

"It seems that a horse dealer, Felipe Garzo by name, loves to swindle natives and beat them."

"He appears to make a business of it." Bardoso replied. "It is in my mind, Don Diego, that you have no love for gossip or rumor, being a true caballero in all things. Yet you may find some amusement in it."

"Say on."

"This Felipe Garzo gives out publicly that he is a rough man, a buyer and breaker of horses. Yet he does not appear to be rough. He walks with a certain amount of grace, using the balls of his feet, I have noted. His hands are well kept, the fingers long and tapered, his wrist that of a man skilled in the use of blade. A pirate notices such things."

"I noticed such myself, good Bardoso."

"And I have done some speculation regarding him, Don Diego, putting together fragments of information and kneading them into a surmise. My conclusion is that the fellow is a jackal."

"Ah! And the lion for whom he finds prey–?"

"Is Capitán Torello, commanding officer at our presidio, and the governor's representative here in Reina de Los Angeles–if you care to call him a lion."

"Interesting!" Don Diego commented.

"As is well known, Capitán Torello is eager to capture Señor Zorro, friend of the oppressed, or to see him slain. There is a rich reward offered by the governor. But how can Capitán Torello capture or slay Señor Zorro if the latter remains in his fox's den, wherever it is?"

"I am quite sure that it would be impossible," Don Diego said.

"So, this Señor Zorro must be drawn out of his den. There must be a decoy. Something must happen to make Zorro want to ride again, and use his whip and blade. So the jackal comes to town, pretending to be what he is not; and he beats and swindles natives–a thing likely to bring Señor Zorro out into the open. Pitfalls have been prepared for him, no doubt."

"No doubt," Don Diego agreed.

"LET us assume that Señor Zorro wishes to punish this Felipe Garzo. He discovers that he is dealing with an expert swordsman instead of a lout. If he dies on the point of a blade, there is an end of Zorro! If he wins, perhaps others will be near to have at him and make a capture. For the jackal is watched always, as he walks abroad, by those who are prepared to rush to his assistance."

"A pretty plot," Don Diego said, yawning.

"Capitán Torello believes that the capture or slaying of Señor Zorro will mean reward and promotion for him. He thinks this Zorro is a man of quality, a caballero who plays at highwayman, and that his defeat would humble a proud family already in the ill grace of the governor, but too powerful for the governor to affront openly."

Don Diego met Bardoso's good eye with two good ones of his own. "Conversation is such tiresome stuff," he commented. "Bardoso, I recall that I asked you to procure for me a certain drug, you being a clandestine dealer in chemicals and nostrums."

"I have what you require, Don Diego."

Bring it to my house after nightfall. Bernardo, my servant, will be in the patio."

"I shall obey, Don Diego."

Then Don Diego walked on, past the row of humble huts and toward his father's splendid house.

A native shuffled from the patch of shade beside one of the huts–a giant of a native, who towered above the others in the town. He was a Cocopah, who had been named José by the Franciscans, and was a man of influence among his kind.

José of the Cocopahs backed away slightly,

and stood with bowed head as Don Diego approached. Don Diego was looking straight forward, and his nose seemed to be tilted a trifle, as though the presence of the native offended him. He brushed his nostrils with his perfumed handkerchief again.

But, as he passed José of the Cocopahs, the corner of Don Diego's mouth twisted slightly, and whispered words came forth:

"Zorro rides tonight! The hacienda trail !"

Chapter Two
A Change Of Identity

DUSK came to Reina de Los Angeles, and lights glowed in the buildings, smoke issued from chimneys, and odors of burning wood and cooking food filled the air.

At the presidio, the troopers were eating and attending to their duties; and in the private quarters of Capitán Torello, the latter held speech with Felipe Garzo, who had been the guest of the capitán for the evening meal. They were conversing in low tones, so that not even the guard in the corridor could hear.

"He took the bait," Felipe Garzo was saying. "His manner was mild enough, but he could not keep the flame out of his eyes. I grabbed the native wretch in front of the door of the inn, and beat him soundly so this Don Diego could not but hear and see."

"I feel certain that he is this Señor Zorro," the capitán said. "If we win in this, Felipe, our fortunes are made. The man's proud father is a thorn in the side of the governor. If this Don Diego Vega is unmasked as Zorro, either dead or alive, the family is shamed–and His Excellency will be well pleased."

"And what to do now?" Felipe Garzo asked.

"You will sleep in the guest house, as usual. Perhaps this Zorro will come to punish you during the night. Three troopers will be on guard and within call. If he comes, he walks into a trap."

"I itch to hold blade and face him!" Felipe Garzo said fiercely. "He treated me as dirt beneath his boots."

"He has treated me in a similar fashion–and his proud father also. But Zorro is clever with a blade. If he bests you–"

"Give me a chance at him!"

"Help will be near at hand," Capitán Torello said, smiling slightly. "If Señor Zorro visits you, there must be no slip. He dies, or is captured–and I care not which."

There came a discreet tap on the door, and the capitán called permission to enter. One of his troopers opened the door and made salute.

"Don Diego Vega to see the capitán," he said.

"Don Diego Vega–here?" Capitán Torello betrayed a measure of astonishment. "Usher him within, and at once."

"Now, what do you suppose–?" Garzo began softly.

"Hush! Let us talk of horses," the capitán whispered. He raised his voice. "I have told you the price that I am allowed to pay, señor. And the horses must pass strict inspection. My troopers are entitled to the best in horseflesh."

"Mine are prime animals," Felipe Garzo replied. "I can assure you–"

"Ah! Don Diego Vega!" Capitán Torello was on his feet, bowing as Don Diego stepped through the door.

"Your pardon, Capitán Torello, for this intrusion," Don Diego said.

"It is an honor!"

"I have a favor to ask. If it is against your policy to grant it, do not hesitate to say so."

"It is granted already, Don Diego, if within my power. Is it something secret and personal? I am discussing business with this horse dealer, but he can retire–"

DON Diego lifted a hand to stop him. "It is nothing that cannot be spoken openly. Scarcely an affair of state. I ride out to the Pulido place to make a social call. It is a dark night, and the servant who usually attends me is ill. My father is out at his hacienda–"

"Ah! And you desire an escort?" the capitán put in. "You may have one, surely. There are highwaymen and cutthroats abroad these nights."

"If I may have that big sergeant of yours, Pedro Gonzales, it will please me. He has an amusing chatter."

"I'll issue the order immediately, Don Diego, and Sergeant Gonzales will be ready as soon as he can saddle his horse. If you will partake of wine–?"

"Your pardon if I do not at this time," Don Diego said. "You are an officer, and you have business to transact. In your line of duty, you must consort with many queer folk. –But there is

nothing, capitán, which compels me to breathe the same air as a man who plays at dice and cards with natives."

"How now–!" Felipe Garzo cried, and sprang from the stool upon which he was sitting.

"Be silent, señor!" Capitán Torello snapped at him. He bowed to Don Diego again. "Some other time, the wine," he said. "I can well understand your situation."

"I wait in front for the sergeant."

As Capitán Torello struck the gong to summon his orderly, Don Diego retreated through the corridor. They could hear his boot-heels tapping the hard floor.

"The fiend!" Felipe Garzo gurgled angrily. "He gets under my skin! To run him through would be a pleasure!"

"Quiet!" the capitán begged. "If he is Zorro, you may have the chance. Otherwise–a caballero such as Don Diego Vega need not fight such a man as you are posing to be."

Garzo sank upon the stool again. "Now what?" he asked. "If he is going visiting, and taking along one of your troopers for escort–"

"If he is Zorro, that would be like him. He will return, pretend to be fatigued and go home and to bed. Then he will put on his costume and mask, and as Zorro he will come back to the presidio. It is but an elegant gesture–asking for an escort. Or, perhaps he wished to learn whether you are at the presidio"

"I'll have his blood!" Felipe Garzo fumed.

"Keep your own cool, and your head also. The angry man is always at a disadvantage," Torello warned...

OUT along the dusty highway, through the deep dust and the soft black night, rode Don Diego Vega with Sergeant Pedro Gonzales just on his left, and half a horse's length behind, as was proper.

"Highwaymen are active again, so the capitán says," Don Diego remarked over his shoulder.

"It is not for me to question the statement of my superior," Gonzales replied.

"This Señor Zorro, who created some excitement along the highway–nothing more is heard of him."

"Attune your ears, Don Diego, and you may hear of him soon. I know certain things which lead me to believe–"

"Tell me not your official secrets!" Don Diego begged. "I am grateful to you for riding with me tonight. I am compelled to go to the Pulido hacienda for a time. It will be a dreary assignment for you, no doubt, for of course you could be drinking wine at the presidio."

"There is a certain bronze native wench at the Pulido place whom it is a rare pleasure to chuck under the chin," the sergeant said.

"Then you will not find time hanging heavy on your hands while I am the house."

Don Diego laughed a bit, and then turned through a huge stone archway and went along a winding road on either side of which great trees grew. At the end of this lane was the Pulido house, and the scattered outbuildings around it. From the servants' huts in the rear came soft laughter and the tinkling of a guitar. Those who worked at the Pulido hacienda were fortunate in having a kind employer who liked to see his people happy.

They dismounted before the front door, and Don Diego handed his reins to the sergeant.

"Take my mount along with your own," he said. "When I am ready to return to Reina de Los Angeles, I'll send a servant for you. Enjoy yourself."

Sergeant Pedro Gonzales hurried around the corner of the big house with the horses, eager to tether them near the servants' huts and to hunt up his wench. Don Diego approached the great front door, but he did not use the knocker.

None knew better than Don Diego that the Señorita Pulido, to whom he was betrothed, was off with her mother paying a visit, and that Don Carlos Pulido was alone in his big house. Don Carlos undoubtedly would be dozing after a heavy meal, and it would be impolite to disturb him.

Through the darkness Don Diego slipped swiftly, dodging the lighter spots, and glad that there was no moon and that a heavy mist partially obscured the light of the stars. Safe away from the house and the buildings, he skipped lightly down a slope, dodging the scattered trees, and finally stopped beside a narrow trail. He gave a low whistle.

"Señor?" The answer came almost immediately, in a whisper, from a clump of brush a few feet away.

"Is it you, José?"

"Sí, señor!"

"Is everything prepared?"

"Here, señor, behind the brush."

WHILE José of the Cocopahs kept close watch a few feet away, piercing the darkness with his keen eyes and straining his ears to catch the slightest sound, Don Diego Vega divested himself of certain of his garments and quickly donned others instead. Across his face he fastened a black mask with slits for the eyes. A blade was strapped at his side.

The garments he had discarded were piled neatly at the base of a tree. From a pouch he took a small bottle, which he handled carefully.

"José!"

"Señor?"

"The torch!"

"Behind this rock, señor, it may not be seen."

Don Diego dropped down behind a big rock, and there was a sudden flare as José kindled a small torch into flame. Don Diego took something from the bottle, propped a mirror against the rock, and worked diligently for a time. He was chuckling as he returned the bottle to the pouch.

"The horse?"

"Ten paces straight ahead, señor."

"You will remember everything?"

"Everything, señor."

"I go. Put out the torch. Zorro rides!"

As he spoke, he draped his form with a long black cloak of thin material. Then he darted forward, to where a black horse was waiting. Don Diego Vega was gone–and in his stead was Señor Zorro, the Fox. And it was Señor Zorro, quite another person, who got into the saddle to ride.

Down the narrow trail he went through the soft night, the horse picking the path; and presently he turned into the highway and rode swiftly toward the town. He was keenly alert, quick to catch sight and sound, his eyes gleaming through the slit's in the mask he wore.

What a game he played, this Don Diego Vega, supposed to be too languid to be a spirited young caballero. Yet it was a dangerous game, he knew well. One fatal slip–and shame would descend upon the Vegas and the jealous governor have his moment of gloating. In truth, Zorro struck only to aid the oppressed and to right wrongs; yet, nevertheless, he acted outside the law.

He topped a hill and saw in the distance the few twinkling lights of Reina de Los Angeles. Now he rode from the trail and over rough ground, and approached the hillside in which stood the presidio, with a deep gulch running behind it.

Zorro rode into the gulch, sent his black horse forward at a walk, and finally emerged behind the low, sprawling presidio buildings, tethering his horse to a tree.

He kept the black cloak wrapped closely around his body as he crept through the fringe of brush on the gulch's rim. His black mask covered his entire face. He was but an unseen part of the night, as he went cautiously toward the presidio buildings. These were on three sides of a large patio, the main barracks on one side, storehouses on another, and a guest house on the third. A commodious structure, this guest house, partitioned into two apartments for the use of both men and women.

It was toward the guest house that Zorro went now, half crawling at times, careful to keep the black cloak wrapped tightly around his body, to refrain from striking a boot against a rock. Careful also that the blade he wore hit against nothing to give forth a warning metallic sound.

Behind a clump of brush he crouched, silent and motionless. It was quiet in the barracks, and he knew that the troopers slept, since all of them save the guard always retired early. No light gleamed through the windows of the guest house. Zorro knew that only one guest reposed there, the man who called himself Felipe Garzo.

Nor was he sure that Garzo was there now. The fellow might be at the inn, or prowling around the pueblo under the protection of a couple of troopers. If so, things were but delayed a bit. And there were others to be considered, too.

Zorro watched and listened, and finally he located them–the lurking guards. There were three, resting on the ground near a clump of brush, not far from the door of the guest house. They were waiting for Zorro to make an attack on Felipe Garzo and so walk into a trap.

Silently, Señor Zorro crept toward them.

Chapter Three
"On Guard, Señor!"

WHEN he was but a short distance away, and they were yet unaware of his presence, Zorro stopped behind another clump of brush. He stood up, rested a moment, and prepared to remove the cloak that shrouded his form.

He could hear the guards whispering to one another as a wine jug was passed from hand to hand.

"He is a decoy, this Señor Horse Trader," one said. "He beats natives so that Zorro will come to get him. Then we shall get Zorro."

"And a handful of gold pieces into the bargain!" another added, chuckling.

"And mayhap divers cuts and slashes from Zorro's blade," the third reminded them.

"We allow this Señor Garzo to do the fighting, merely seeing that Zorro does not escape if he wins," the first said. "If he bests the horse dealer, the three of us must account for him."

"He is a demon! He slips around like a ghost. It may be he is not human man at all."

It was at this moment that Señor Zorro whipped off the light cloak and stepped from behind the clump of brush. An eerie wail rumbled from his throat, grew in volume, and seemed to shatter the silence of the night. It beat back from the walls of the presidio buildings, rushed away on the hill breeze.

The three troopers sprang to their feet, alarm striking at them. They glanced around quickly, as Zorro wailed again.

And then they saw! A short distance from them, in the midst of the Stygian blackness of the night and seemingly drifting toward them, was the skull and chest of a skeleton.

Again there came that eerie wail. The apparition bore toward them. They could see the gleaming outline of the skull, the great gleaming eye sockets. The throat and shoulder bones and the upper ribs were also visible.

Brave men they might have been in physical combat. None of them would have retreated even from a superior foe. Soldiers they were, and skilled in the use of weapons; but they also were superstitious.

They could have understood a charging enemy and prepared to clash and fight it out; but when the third eerie wail came rumbling through the night at them, the gleaming skeleton apparently starting to advance toward them again, it was more than their nerves could endure.

"Dios!" one cried.

Their shrieks of superstitious fear rang out. As one man they turned and charged away toward the barracks, howling for their comrades to come to their aid, to bring blazing torches. Together the three made a tumult equal to the noise of a frenzied score.

Voices answered them from the barracks, and in front of the building the sentinel on regular post shouted for the capitán. From the guest house came the raucous bellowing of Señor Felipe Garzo. He demanded to know what was happening.

Zorro quickly wrapped the dark cloak around him again, and put the hood of it up over his head. The gleaming skeleton disappeared. Through the black night he rushed noiselessly to the corner of the guest house, and there watched the door.

Light gleamed within, and the door was hurled open. Señor Felipe Garzo stood framed in it, partly clothed, holding a flaming torch above his head with his left hand, a naked blade in his right.

"What is it?" he shouted.

THE guards had rushed across the patio to the corner of the barracks, where a door had been opened for them. Out of the barracks, the other troopers were tumbling in their night clothing, shouting and clashing weapons. Capitán Torello appeared, crying for order and silence, and for somebody to tell him what had happened. Felipe Garzo left the guest house and rushed across the patio, carrying his sword and his torch.

Quickly, Zorro slipped through the guest house door and got inside the big room. In a corner was a huge clothes press, and into this he went, but for the time being kept its door half open. Thus he was able to see across the room and into the patio.

There were a dozen torches in the patio now, and troopers were commencing a search, the capitán's angry shouts urging them on. Felipe Garzo came back toward the guest house with Capitán Torello beside him.

"It was a fiery skeleton," one of the guards kept repeating. "A skeleton with flaming bones. All of us saw it, capitán. It screeched threats at us."

"And where did you see it first?"

"Over there, by the clump of brush. It seemed to be floating through the air at us. And the screech it gave–!"

"It probably came out of this empty wine jug I find here on the ground," the capitán suggested. "Strange sights and sounds may be found in a jug!"

"But we all saw it at the same time, capitán, and heard it. It was a terrible thing!"

"What think you, Garzo?" the capitán asked.

"That you have some strange troopers, capitán," Garzo replied. "A flaming skeleton that screeched–um! There's nobody here."

Capitán Torello whirled upon his men. "Idiots and cowardly fools!" he stormed. "Whoever saw a flaming skeleton? And can any skeleton shriek? Wine has robbed you of what wits you possessed. And perhaps it also has ruined our plans for the night. Return to your post–and you others get to your beds!"

"We are to continue the watch?" a guard asked. "And in the darkness?"

"You are, though probably it will avail nothing now. You were put on a secret post, to keep quiet and perhaps trap a fox. And you have howled enough to frighten away every fox in the land."

"A terrible thing!" a guard moaned.

"Remain on post, imbeciles, though you shiver and shake! Do not desert, for I may come out at any time to see if you are attending to duty. And do not make a light."

The three returned to the clump of brush where they had been watching, and the others retired to the barracks. Torello remained with Felipe Garzo at the door of the guest room. By the light of the torches they carried, they could view the interior. They saw nothing unusual, for Zorro had by this time closed the door of the huge press, and was snug inside.

"What do you make of it, capitán?" Garzo asked.

"I scarce know, señor!"

"The guards were badly frightened–no pretense there."

"They are a superstitious lot. Something undoubtedly happened to frighten them. But, a skeleton that shrieks–!"

"It is yet early in the night. Perhaps the man we expect will come to us yet."

"I doubt it," the capitán said. "Zorro strikes when men expect it not. Perhaps he has been near, had something planned, and the howling of the guards ruined his calculations."

"I'll to bed again," Felipe Garzo decided.

" 'Noches!"

THE capitán stalked away toward the barracks building with rage in his stride, and Felipe Garzo closed the door of the guest house and walked across to his bed. He surveyed the room an instant, then plunged the head of the torch into the bowl of sand to extinguish it. That made the interior of the big room black dark, for the heavy draperies had been drawn across the windows.

Garzo stretched out upon the couch half dressed, as he had appeared at the door a while before, and reached down to pull the protecting quilt of skins up to his chin, for he had grown cold running about the patio. He turned on one side, so facing the opposite wall of the room. And suddenly he gave a gasp of surprise and struggled to sit up. For there, on the adobe wall of the room, in quivering shining letters, was the one word: *Muerte*. And below it was a big jagged letter Z.– "Death!" And the sign of Zorro.

Felipe Garzo sprang out of bed and grasped the torch again. Feverishly, he kindled it, meanwhile straining his ears for sounds inside the room, but hearing nothing. The light flared up and Garzo gave a sigh of relief to find that Señor Zorro was not standing before him, his eyes gleaming through the slits in his mask.

Across the room he went, and to the wall. But it seemed innocent of anything except a damp smear. He could not understand it.

"Am I, too, growing into an imbecile?" Felipe Garzo growled aloud to himself. "A pest, this Zorro! He grows on the imagination of a man. If ever I stand face to face with him, blade in hand–!"

He left the threat unfinished and retired to the couch again. Once more he extinguished the torch. And as he did so, there flamed out on the wall again the letter and the sign!

"I shall go mad!" Garzo breathed. "It is some trick, such as was played on the guards.–A boy's trick!–It will take something more substantial than writing on a wall to harm me."

He closed his eyes and turned his head away, but his ears were open. He could hear the faint rustling of the wind through the brush outside, and the howling of a dog down near the plaza. But

"The last stroke is a delicate matter," Zorro said. "I like to join the scratches, so that the letter Z will be perfect–"

nothing else. Inside the guest house, all was as still as death.

After a time he looked at the wall again. The word and the sign were still there, though seemingly they did not shine with such great radiance. Felipe Garzo fought with himself to remain calm, to keep from lighting the torch and making a fresh investigation.

INSIDE the big clothes press, Señor Zorro was growing cramped and uncomfortable. It was hot and stuffy, and the perspiration was trickling down his neck, causing a delicious kind of agony. He opened the door of the press for the space of a couple of inches, looked out into the darkness of the room, listened.

Felipe Garzo was tossing on his bed. His breathing became heavier, and once it approached a snore. Then Zorro opened the door wider, and finally stepped gingerly down to the floor, closing the door of the press behind him slowly and noiselessly.

His long dark cloak was wrapped closely around him, covering him from head to feet. As he stood against the wall, he could not be seen. All at once he dropped the cloak to the floor and drew himself up. He began to speak in a weak monotone:

"You who call yourself Felipe Garzo!–You are an impostor and a wretch!–Jackal!–Cheap decoy!"

"Dios!" Felipe Garzo threw the skin quilt aside and sat erect on the couch. His first glance was at the opposite wall, where the word and the ragged letter Z still gleamed faintly at him. "I am going mad!" he breathed. "The wine at dinner was too strong. A pest on this accursed place!"

The perspiration was standing out on his forehead in great globules. That word on the wall seemed to dance before his eyes. He had not yet observed the presence of the stranger.

"Jackal!" the hissed whisper came to his ears

"Help ! – Guards ! – Zorro is here !" Garzo shouted.

again. "So you would trap and trick Señor Zorro, eh?"

Felipe Garzo jerked his head around. Then he sprang from the couch and crashed back against the wall, making a wild grab for the sword and dagger which he had left handy on a stool. The stool went over with a crash, sword and dagger flew aside. For across the room, Felipe Garzo beheld what the guards had seen–the upper half of a skeleton in gleaming, quivering light. And from that direction came also a soft, mocking laugh, and a sound such as that made by blade being drawn from scabbard, deliberately, with evident morbid purpose.

Garzo did not cry out; he did not screech to attract the attention of the guards supposed to be outside. He did not care to make a fool of himself, as the others had made laughing stocks of themselves. First of all, this thing called for investigation. Though his heart hammered at his ribs and his ears were strained to catch sounds of footsteps, his eyes never left that quivering, flaming skeleton.

Felipe Garzo reached for the torch and made shift to kindle it into flame. As the light flared up, there was a quick step on the other side of the room. He whirled. And there he saw a man in dark clothing, with a black mask across his face, and on the forehead of the mask a ragged letter Z.

"Zorro!" Felipe Garzo gasped.

"At your service, beater of natives! Swindler and cheat and thief!"

Garzo backed to the wall, stooped swiftly, and retrieved sword and dagger. This was the moment for which he had waited. And now that the queer apparition had gone with the coming of the light, courage returned to him. He was not without skill with a blade.

"This shall be the end of you, Zorro!" he hissed.

"A thing to be proved!"

"In a moment, señor, I shall strip off your mask and have a look at your dead face!"

"You'll find it much more pleasant than your own.–Are you going to call to the guards for help? Are you about to summon the soldiery? How

many men do you need for aid, Felipe Garzo, when you cross blades with another man?"

"None!" Garzo said.

"I warn you, out of the kindness of my heart, that it will be safer for you to call."

But here was a business which Felipe Garzo wished to finish himself, that he might gain greater notoriety. To take the notorious Zorro alone and unaided–there was a feat!

He thrust the torch into its holder on the wall, and it cast a flickering and uncertain light across the big room.

"Now, highwayman–!"

"On guard, señor!" Zorro said.

Chapter Four
Combat

THEY met, clashed, felt each other's strength, and then were at it. At the first encounter, Zorro knew that here was a swordsman, and no poor novice to be disarmed and marked or done to death. The first clash of steel seemed to turn Felipe Garzo into a cold fighting machine. The man had shaken off his disguise, in a manner of speaking; no longer was he Felipe Garzo, uncouth horse trader and breaker.

"Beater of natives!" Zorro taunted. "Jackal for the capitán and the governor!"

"Highwayman!" the other gasped.

But they did not waste breath in epithets, for breath was a thing which both needed in this combat. Around and around the room they fought, each trying to get the advantage of light, avoiding the heavy articles of furniture, using what skill they possessed.

The perspiration was glistening on the forehead of the man who called himself Felipe Garzo, and the expression in his face was that of a man who knows he has met his match.

Zorro's features were hidden by the mask he wore, wherein he had an advantage, for the other could not read the workings of his mind. The eyes gleamed through the slits malevolently. Now and then teeth glistened in a provoking smile. Feet slipped over the rough flooring of the guest house, and steel hissed and sang.

Neither cried out, but they gasped and panted as they fought, and their ringing blades could be heard. Outside, the guards heard them, and approached the building, listening at the door and beneath one of the windows. They knew that these were sounds of fight which came from inside. But nobody cried to them for help. There was no shout that Zorro was at hand. Merely the clash of good steel and the panting breaths of the swordsmen. And the troopers were loath to enter and disturb, and gain a rebuke if they made error.

"Get to the capitán and tell him," one ordered, and a comrade rushed away.

"If Gonzales were only here!" another suggested.

"He has gone with Don Diego Vega to the Pulido place, as an escort. Perhaps the capitán will come. If there was but a cry for help–"

Inside the big room, the torch flickered and cast shadows. Footing was uncertain. Felipe Garzo felt himself being bested by this masked man who taunted now in low tones. His strength was leaving him rapidly. He had met his match in fence, and a man who was in better condition physically.

Fear of death came to him, and also the fear that this man might escape after having slain him. He retreated toward the wall and prepared to shout an alarm. For an instant, he grew careless. The blade of Zorro darted in like the tongue of a snake, and Felipe Garzo felt a streak of fire across his check.

"The first stroke, señor," Zorro said. "I write my mark on your face in three strokes, señor–for all the world to see–always. You will not have to tell them with whom you have fought."

GARZO attacked furiously then, and blindly, for rage consumed him and wrecked caution.

Again Zorro's blade darted in, and Felipe Garzo felt another streak of flame. Blood trickled down his cheek from the wound.

"The last stroke is a delicate matter," Zorro said. "I like to join the scratches, so that the letter Z will be perfect. And, after having marked you–!"

The sentence was left unfinished, but Garzo's imagination ran on. In fancy, he felt the blade slip through his body, to protrude at the back, felt it whipped out again and himself falling to crash to the floor, and then the dark oblivion of an unknown future–

"Help!–Guards!–Zorro is here!" he shouted.

"Craven!" Zorro hissed. As he spoke, his blade darted forward again, and the letter Z was now completed. Felipe Garzo darted back against

the wall to make his last desperate stand.

Now the guards were pounding at the door, howling to know whether they should enter.

"Help!–Zorro is here!" Felipe Garzo's last cry strangled in his throat.

But Señor Zorro had not slain him. He had merely disarmed him neatly, then run his blade through a shoulder. Garzo dropped to the floor, moaning more with fright than with pain, disarmed and helpless, expecting a death blow at any moment.

"Quiet, or you die!" Zorro hissed at him.

Then Felipe Garzo did a foul thing. He still clutched his dagger in his left hand; and now he transferred it swiftly to his right, hurling it straight at the masked man before him, in open defiance of all rules of fair combat. Instantly, Zorro darted aside, and the flying weapon glanced from the steel of his blade.

"Scum!" Zorro cried, and his blade flashed again, and came back red.

Nor had he struck to kill this time–but only to give a wound that would bring unconsciousness. For if, as Zorro believed, this "horse trader" was a proud swordsman of the governor's retinue, to go through life shamed with Zorro's brand would be a sterner lesson to him, and to other bravos like him, than a swift and painless death.

Zorro whirled away from his fallen adversary, even as he heard the voice of Capitán Torello shouting for his men to get through the door. From his pouch, he took the little bottle, and for a time worked swiftly at the wall, and on the face of the fallen man.

An instant later he had darted across the room and had extinguished the torch, and grasping his long black cloak he enveloped himself in it. Then he darted to the big door and stood so it would cover him when it was hurled open.

The next moment it crashed inward. The guest room was in total blackness, for those who carried torches had not yet reached the building. Immediately the guards who had opened the door recoiled, cries of awe rumbling from their throats. For gleaming on the opposite wall was a huge skull, and below it a jagged letter Z. And on the floor in a corner was something that moaned and tossed and might have been a man. On it was another Z, that gleamed and quivered in the midst of the darkness.

The guards howled, terrified, and then the capitán was there with the others and the place was lit by torches. Blades out and ready, they stormed into the room. Their first swift glances revealed nothing except Felipe Garzo, wounded and bleeding, and the indications of combat–overturned furniture, blotches of blood upon the floor. For Señor Zorro was behind the very door which they had hurled open and back against the wall. He was only a few feet from them in reality, though not in their thoughts.

AND now, since they had all rushed past him, Señor Zorro darted from behind the door and prepared to rush forth into the black night. –But his work was not yet done. He had punished Felipe Garzo, but he must also disabuse the capitán of the idea that Señor Zorro was in reality Don Diego Vega.

"Ha! Señores! You look for me, perhaps?" he cried.

They whirled, and in that instant he had darted through the door and was gone, his mocking laugh ringing back at them.

"After him!" Torello cried. "Get horses for a chase, some of you! Saddle my own mount!"

Some were in night clothing, and some in boots and breeches only, notably the capitán. Some chased out into the black night and in the direction Zorro had taken, guided by his mocking laugh. But he reached his horse safely enough and got himself into the saddle, and then he was quiet, listening to the troopers as they charged toward the stables.

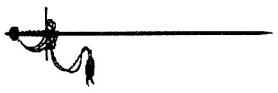
Horses were always ready for the trail, at the presidio, and men mounted these. Others were soon made ready rapidly. Capitán Torello mounted his own horse, not stopping to finish his dressing, and making neither a brave nor an attractive picture in his present half attire.

But out of the night and past them there suddenly rode a demon on a black horse, who howled at them as he passed. The flaming upper half of a skeleton again–for Zorro had not put on his cloak.

Troopers gave cries of alarm, but their capitán silenced them.

"It is but Zorro! It is a trick!" Torello howled. "After him!–A reward to the man who catches or slays him!"

And back to them, as they began their hard ride, came the mocking laugh of Zorro.



Chapter Five
The Last Taunt

OUT of the pueblo they flew, along the hard highway which ran toward San Fernando. There was no moon, but the mist had now been dispelled by the sea breeze. Ahead, now and then, they caught sight of horse and rider against the starlit sky. They gained some, and that heartened them. Capitán Torello, leading, urged them on. Half-naked they rode, the troopers from Reina de Los Angeles, rage burning within them. In some strange manner he had made babies and fools of them, this Zorro, and they sought revenge–as well as the reward that had been offered. Over hills they went, around great curves in the highway, up slopes and down through gulches. And because of the mocking laugh that came back to them, and the hoofs pounding on ahead, they knew they still followed Zorro.

"Flaming skeleton!" Zorro chuckled as he rode. "A man may have a certain amusement by the use of phosphorus.–A glow in the night!"

He laughed yet again, so that his pursuers heard as they slackened pace to negotiate a steep hill. Then Zorro increased speed a little, gradually increasing the distance between himself and the enemy–yet not so much that the pounding of his mount's hoofs could not be heard.

They swept after him, around another long curve in the road and up another slope. Zorro increased his speed again, and presently skidded his big black to a stop near the edge of a sea of brush.

"José!" softly.

"Here, señor!"

"All is well, José! Ride!"

Zorro sprang out of the saddle, and José of the Cocopahs sprang into it. The black started again, and again the ringing hoofs gave signal to those behind. Crouching in the brush, Zorro watched them ride furiously past, chasing José, who had a way of losing them when he willed, and of caring for the black in a secret hiding place.

Zorro rushed along a little trail and came to the spot where he had left his clothes. Swiftly he stripped the Zorro costume from him, put aside mask and blade, and donned the clothing of Don Diego Vega. The Zorro costume, streaked with phosphorus, was hidden beneath a rock, where José would get it later.

Through the brush Don Diego Vega hurried, then, and up the side of the hill, approaching the great house of the Pulidos cautiously. From the servants' huts there came a gale of laughter, and he heard the raucous voice of Sergeant Pedro Gonzales, evidently happy.

Zorro went up to the big front door, and used the knocker. A servant opened to him, and he strode across a wide room to find Don Carlos Pulido rising to greet him.

"DON Diego! At this hour! There is something amiss?"

"Why, no, señor," Don Diego said, and yawned. "Two or three hours ago I came to your fine house to make you a visit of courtesy and to have speech with the father of my betrothed. Do you not remember?"

"How is this?"

"We have been talking of politics, all this while, and I have been greatly bored. I am just now taking leave of you, señor. I came with the big sergeant, Gonzales, for escort. Will you have the kindness to send a servant and tell the sergeant to bring my horse to the front?"

"Certainly, Don Diego!"

The servant was called by a clapping of hands, and the order given.

"This man realizes that I have been here for hours, does he not? He admitted me again just now, it is true, but I had only stepped out to ascertain the meaning of some sound we heard."

"Have no fear." Don Carlos Pulido smiled.

"There is but one soiled wine glass on the table," Don Diego observed.

"And there should be two when two men have been talking for hours? Do me the honor, Don Diego, of soiling another."

Don Diego did so, and as their eyes met over the tops of their glasses, Don Carlos Pulido's brows arched questioningly.

"Zorro has been riding?" he asked.

"So I understand."

"Good fortune attend him always!" Don Carlos said earnestly.

"I thank you."

"And wipe the red dust from your boots before you leave. Can you imagine even a dolt of a trooper thinking you got that dust on your boots in my house?"

Don Diego turned scarlet, took out his scented handkerchief and wiped his boots with it, then tucked it away where no other could find it.

"The best of us grow careless at times," he muttered.

Then they went to the door together, a servant holding a torch; and there was Sergeant Pedro Gonzales with the horses.

Don Diego Vega mounted, waved to his host, and rode away, down the lane and toward the main road that ran to Reina de Los Angeles.

"Did you find your wench, Gonzales?" he asked haughtily.

"She was away on a visit to an aunt–but I found another."

"And the wine was good?"

"Excellent–and plenty of it. I ask a favor, Don Diego. Whenever you need an escort to come to the Pulido hacienda, ask for my services."

"You had sport, and I but talked politics," Don Diego said. "But what is this we have ahead?" he demanded all at once.

"Ha!" Gonzales gasped, and whipped out his blade.

Ahead of them was a body of horsemen, riding slowly into the highway from a cross trail. Three of them carried torches.

"Troopers!" Gonzales said, and sighed in relief.

He had expected to fight a band of highwaymen in defense of Don Diego Vegas's proud and wealthy person.

"And what can they be doing here?" Don Diego asked.

THEY were heard, and the troop rushed toward them, the torches being held high, Capitán Torello in the van. Arms gleamed in the light. Strained faces looked at Gonzales and the man who rode beside him.

"What is all this?" Don Diego asked. "Capitán! You ride abroad half-naked, like a native? And your men–some in their night clothing! Is it a lark of some sort?"

Capitán Torello did not like the bantering tone, but he was on guard. He was suspicious of Don Diego Vega, but a man had to have more than mere suspicion when he affronted one of the mighty Vega family.

"We have been chasing Zorro," the capitán said. "He came to the presidio and attacked the horse trader."

"The fellow who beats natives?"

"The same," Torello replied. "You have been to the Pulido hacienda?"

"For a lifetime, it seems," Don Diego said. "And now I am eager to get me home and to bed."

The troopers made way for him, and he rode forward.

Capitán Torello urged his mount beside that of the sergeant.

"What has this Don Diego been doing?" the capitán asked.

"He visited in the big house."

"His horse?"

"I cared for it the entire time."

"Take charge of the troop!"

Capitán Torello spurred forward to a place beside Don Diego Vega again.

"This Zorro marked the–er–horse trader," he said. "Carved his accursed letter on the fellow's cheek."

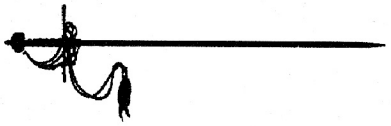
"Spare me!" Don Diego begged. "Am I always to hear of blood-letting?–Capitán, you are commanding officer under the governor for this district. It is your duty to catch or slay this Zorro and put an end to the turmoil, the constant fighting and pursuits. Why do you not do so?"

Capitán Torello had no adequate answer.

ZORRO

Deals With Treason

Salute the Robin Hood of Alta California!
Tonight he rides–
to inscribe his brand upon the face of perfidy!



Chapter One

DOWN the canyon and toward the temporary summer village of the Calientes rolled a tattoo of hoofbeats which grew rapidly in volume and echoed from the rocks.

The tribesmen at the fires sprang quickly and silently to their feet, reaching for their weapons, and some darted back out of the revealing moonlight to positions of advantage in the darkness. They knew that it was not a native's pony coming, but the mount of a white man, for the sounds told them clearly that the mount wore shoes.

But the unknown rider was not approaching furtively, like an enemy or a spy. So those about the fires relaxed, though they kept their weapons handy and curiosity remained with them. Down the narrow trail, presently, the rider came.

The horse he bestrode was a huge black, like a shadow in the bright moonlight. The rider wore a long black mask, and there was a blade at his side, moonlight glinting from its polished scabbard.

" 'Tis Señor Zorro!" somebody cried.

"Zorro...Zorro!" Those around the fires took up the cry, greeted him with wild shouts.

At the edge of the circle of amber light cast by the nearest fire, the rider drew rein. The tribesmen hurried toward him, to group and stand silently and respectfully, waiting for him to speak.

Here was Señor Zorro, the mysterious one, and their friend. In many ways, he had demonstrated his friendship. Here was the elusive rider who made fools of the soldiery who tried to catch him, who punished those who mistreated the natives and cheated them, crossing blades willingly with any and all, and leaving a jagged letter Z on the cheeks of those he fought, so marking them forever as men who had been vanquished by him.

"You know me?" he shouted at them.

"Zorro...Zorro!" they cried in answer.

He lifted a hand in a demand for them to be silent, and they gave him instant attention. Then he spoke:

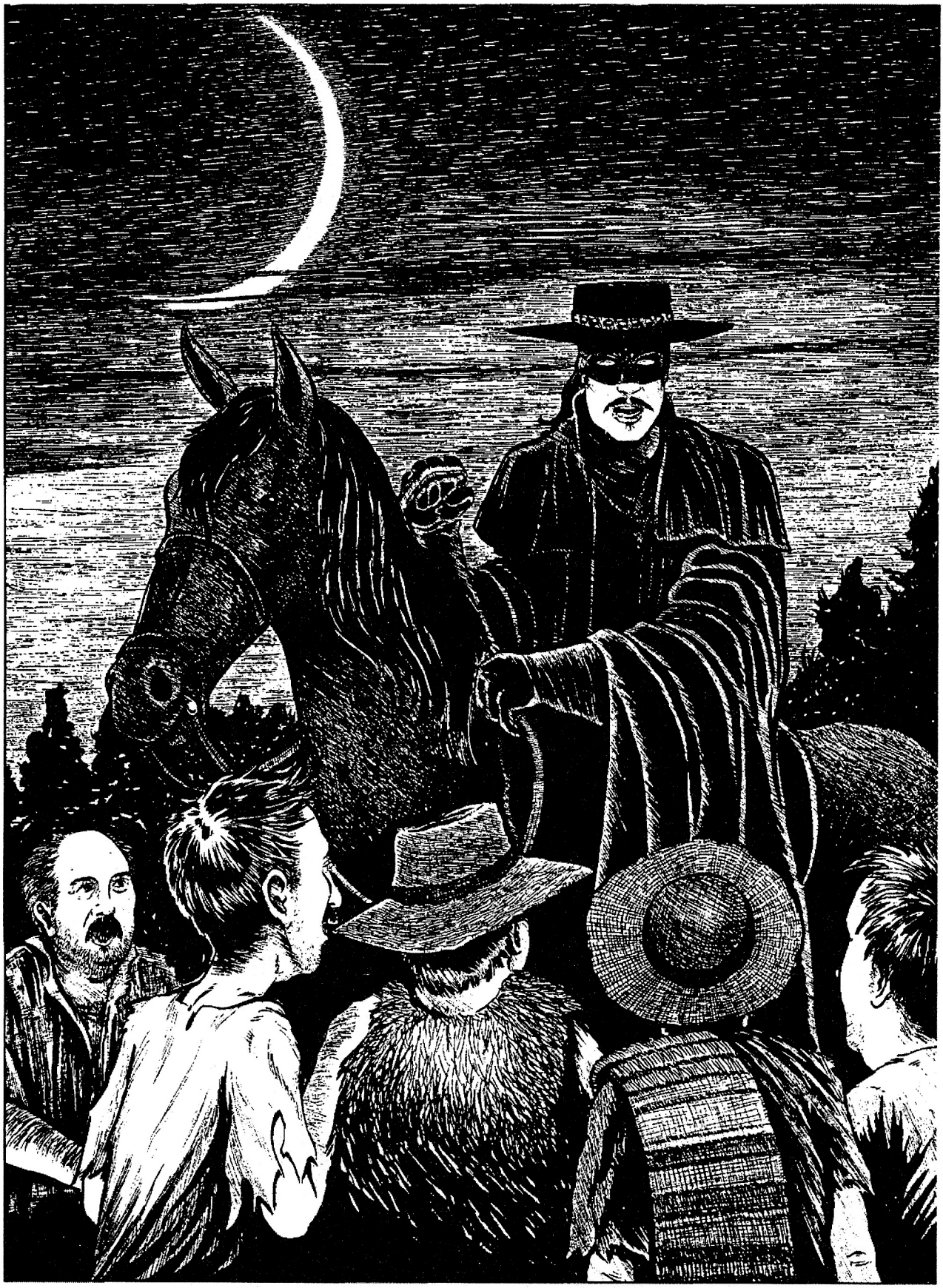
"I have done what little I could to protect and defend such as you. But it is impossible that one man do everything. Also, it is written that a man must help himself as well as take help from others."

They muttered at his words, but none of them made reply. They could not understand to what his remarks were leading.

"You are being abused, cheated, wronged," the masked rider continued, his voice ringing back from the rocks.

"You are treated worse than the flea-bitten dogs of the pueblo. You stand still and mute while the lash is being put across your backs. Are you men?"

They began muttering again, and sounds of rage rumbled from their throats as they remem-



"I have done what I can to protect and defend such as you,
But it is impossible that one man do everything."

bered certain indignities and wrongs.

"Now, there is a plan afoot to make all of you slaves. Do you wish that?"

"No! No!" they howled.

"Then you must band together, and strike! Spare the few whites who are your friends, and slay the others. Use the torch on their buildings. Take what goods you wish from their homes. Drive your enemies from the land of your birth, and be free and happy again. You must prepare at once. The other tribes are preparing, and the Calientes must get ready also. I shall lead you to victory."

THEY cheered wildly when he said that, until the rock walls of the canyon rang with the echoes. The masked rider lifted a hand again in a demand for silence.

"Use care in your planning," he cautioned. "Do not let your enemies know what you do. The attack must be a complete surprise. Tomorrow night, at this same hour, I shall come to you again. That is all."

The shrill voice was still, and the echoes died away. A moment longer he remained there, looking down at them, then the black horse was turned. Hoofs spurned the flinty ground as he galloped back along the canyon trail, up to level country, back toward the little pueblo of Reina de Los Angeles.

Again, the tribesmen gathered around the fires, their heads bent forward. They talked in whispers until the dawn came stealing over the hills.

Señor Zorro would lead them against their enemies! They would use the torch and their knives, and be masters again in the land of their birth!

Wrongs, indignities would be avenged. They could not fail, for Señor Zorro himself would lead them. He would come again the following night to their camp, probably with complete plans for the uprising.

But Señor Zorro–which is to say Don Diego Vega–knew nothing of all this. He was not abroad this night, riding his black horse, with a mask over his face and a blade ready at his side.

He was in his father's house in Reina de Los Angeles, reading the works of a poet, confined to his room, sneezing and sniffling inelegantly because of a cold in his head.

Chapter Two

DON Diego Vega retained the cold the following afternoon when he went to take the air in the plaza, though his chest had been well greased with tallow, and he had eaten quantities of honey into which some evil-tasting drug had been mixed by good Fray Felipe of the chapel.

Don Diego strolled leisurely toward a mean hut wherein resided a certain Bardoso, a reformed and retired pirate. He could see Bardoso sitting on a bench on the shady side of his hut, the ever-present wine jug beside him.

Bardoso had one good eye, which lighted with interest when he beheld Don Diego's approach. The other eye had been lost during an affray on the high seas some years before, the man who had caused its loss having gone over the side an instant later to be food for sharks, and carrying Bardoso's cutlass with him in his breast.

Bardoso arose from the bench and bowed low, almost upsetting himself, for his legs were none too steady, due to the wine he had taken.

"A good day to you, pirate!" Don Diego said.

"The best day ever to you, Don Diego!" Bardoso replied. And, as he bowed low again, he added cautiously: "A private word with you señor, if you don't mind."

"Do not stand to windward of me," Don Diego ordered, as he brushed a scented lace handkerchief across his nostrils. "I have a bad cold in the head, but there are some odors so penetrating–"

"I trust that I do not offend you with a stench," Bardoso said. He was but jesting. Concerning odors, Bardoso felt secure, for he had taken a bath the last full moon, and there would not be another full moon for two or three days.

"How goes life with you, Bardoso?" Don Diego asked.

"I have some gossip which may amuse you."

"Say on!"

A swift glance around assured Bardoso that nobody was within earshot. "A certain tribesman of the Cocopahs, a neophyte known as José, who had listened to the frailes of the missions and has consented to adopt Christianity and work for them for nothing–"

"Enough!" Don Diego interrupted. "Use fewer words. I know José of the Cocopahs."

"This morning he told me a strange tale, repeating what had been told him by a friendly Ca-

liente. It was that Señor Zorro appeared last night at the Caliente camp, and urged the tribesmen to an uprising."

"Indeed?" Don Diego said, casually.

"As the tale runs, Señor Zorro is to visit the camp again tonight at the same hour, in furtherance of the plan. It is in my mind that the troopers of the presidio may hear of it and lay a trap to catch him."

Don Diego blinked rapidly. Here was news.

"I cannot believe that the man was Zorro," Bardoso continued. "Zorro is not one to urge rebellion. Some rogue must be leading the natives astray."

"Possibly," Don Diego agreed.

"It is putting a stain upon the name of the real Zorro."

"I am wondering," Don Diego said, "who would go to the trouble of staining Zorro's name, and why."

"Ha, that is a thought! It is some deep plot, perhaps."

"No doubt," Don Diego agreed. "Is there more gossip, pirate?"

"It is rumored that the new officer at the presidio, this Captain Marcos Lopez, is great friends with the person calling himself Don Miguel Sebastiano, lately come from San Francisco de Asis."

"I find nothing particularly strange in that." Don Diego remarked.

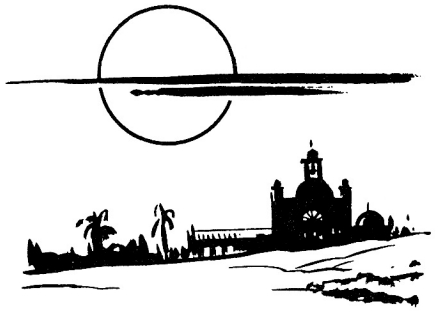
"As you say, Don Diego, there is nothing strange in it–birds of a breed fly together."

Don Diego chuckled and tossed Bardoso a coin. "Drink you my health, Señor Pirate," he said. And, in a lower voice, he added: "The health of Señor Zorro, also."

"With deep pleasure, Don Diego."

"Your one good eye sees much. But, which is better, you still have two good ears."

Don Diego chuckled again and strode on, glancing across the plaza toward the inn. He was thinking.



SO A spurious Señor Zorro was abroad, stirring up the natives and getting the genuine Zorro a reputation for treason. No doubt, it was expected that the genuine Zorro would learn of it, and visit the camp of the Calientes to get at the truth, and there be captured.

Recently, there had been an exchange of officers at the presidia in Reina de Los Angeles, where Capitán Marcos Lopez was now in command. It was said that this Capitán Lopez stood high in the regard of His Excellency, the Governor.

And His Excellency had some suspicion that Don Diego Vega was Señor Zorro, and would like to expose him as such, having an abiding hatred for Don Diego's father, who preferred honesty in affairs of state, and did not hesitate to say so.

Also, there had arrived some days before a certain Don Miguel Sebastiano, supposed to be touring through the country for pleasure. Don Diego knew him for a rogue with blade for sale. He would not be tarrying in Reina de Los Angeles did he not expect profit from the visit. And he was friendly with Capitán Marcos Lopez!

Don Diego's cold was not so bad but what he was able to smell a plot. No doubt, Don Miguel Sebastiano was the counterfeit Zorro. And the genuine Zorro was to be decoyed into a trap and destroyed.

Strolling slowly, Don Diego came presently to the shady side of the plaza and entered the inn. The fat landlord made haste to welcome him bowing low, dusting off a bench, and bring his best wine mug–a ponderous thing studded with semi-precious stones.

There was loud talk in a corner of the room, and Don Diego saw that Don Miguel Sebastiano was there. The fellow affected fine raiment, but carried it as a crow would the feathers of a pheasant.

He observed Don Diego in turn, and his eyes gleamed maliciously. He whispered to his companions of the bowl, and as they watched, he lurched to his feet and reeled toward the table beside which Don Diego was sitting.

"Have I the rare honor of addressing Don Diego Vega?" he asked, smirking.

"As you have remarked, señor, it is an honor," Don Diego replied, his eyes like steel.

"I have been informed," Don Miguel said, with a sneer on his lips, and speaking loudly enough for all in the big room to hear, "that you

waste time reading the works of poets."

"Time is not wasted in reading, señor, if one is intelligent enough to understand what one reads."

"And do you also do needlework?" Don Miguel asked, with a broad smile.

"When I do, señor, the needle I use has a sharp point," Don Diego replied.

"How is this–you grow angry? Your blood is hot? Are you not afraid of a stroke?"

"Nor of a thrust, señor!" Don Diego assured him.

"Ha! That remark would be creditable for a fighting man. But sweet love nonsense is more to your liking than fighting, is it not?"

THE frantic landlord was hovering near, fearing for a tragedy in his place, but he could do nothing to prevent this. The others in the room enjoyed seeing the aristocratic Don Diego Vega baited.

"I perceive," Don Diego said to his tormentor, "that you are trying to force a quarrel upon me. You have intimated that I am not a fighting man."

"I have, Don Diego."

"Perhaps, señor, that is why you are trying to pick a quarrel. Would you be so eager, if you thought that I had fighting ability?"

Don Miguel's face turned almost purple with wrath as somebody in the rear of the room laughed.

"Are you making an effort to be insulting, Don Diego?" Don Miguel roared.

"Making an effort? Alas, I thought that I had succeeded," Don Diego replied. "However, I am not adept at giving insults. It is a thing a caballero does not do well."

"Señor! Your words are almost beyond endurance!" Don Miguel cried.

He lurched forward angrily, and probably would have drawn blade, had there not been an interruption. But there entered from the plaza Capitán Marcos Lopez, and the commandante, understanding the scene at once, hastened forward with an arm upflung in warning.

"Señores!" he cried. "Let us have no serious trouble here! Don Miguel Sebastiano, you forget yourself! Perhaps you have taken too much wine."

Don Miguel acted like a man who suddenly remembers something of the utmost importance. He looked at the officer sheepishly, muttered some words that could not be understood, and lurched back to the corner to continue his wining and dicing.

"We have troubles enough already, with this confounded Señor Zorro planning an uprising of the natives," Capitán Lopez continued.

"What is this?" the landlord cried. "The natives are to trouble us again?"

"What did you expect? This Zorro pretends to right their wrongs to get a following, then turns renegade. It is always so. He should be hunted down like a mad dog," the capitán said. "But have no fear! My troopers will handle this precious Señor Zorro. For his treason, he shall hang!"

Don Diego Vega politely stifled a yawn with the back of his hand as he arose to leave. "I would not shape the noose, capitán, until I had caught him," he suggested.

"It might be only a waste of your valuable time."

Chapter Three

AT DUSK that day, Sergeant Pedro Gonzales stood stiffly at attention in the presence of his commanding officer in the latter's quarters at the presidio.

Don Miguel Sebastiano was sitting beside the capitán, having dined with him, and he quaffed wine as he inspected the burly sergeant from hat to boots.

"Understand me well, Sergeant Gonzales, and make no errors," the capitán was saying. "You will take all the troopers except my orderly, and ride at once to the canyon, and go into hiding there, careful that you are not observed by the natives."

"It is an order, capitán."

"Don Miguel, as the bogus Zorro, will visit the camp again and utter treasonable words, which you and your men will remember if called on later to testify."

"Understood, capitán."

"Allow Don Miguel to ride away. The genuine Zorro may visit the camp. If he does, capture him. Then the treasonable words of the false Zorro may be fastened on the real Zorro, and he may be convicted of treason and hung. It will serve better than slaying him in fight, for all will rise against him as a renegade, and it will mean disgrace for his proud family."

"It is understood, capitán," the big sergeant said. His countenance remained inscrutable.

"You know the identity of the man we have under suspicion. His house is being watched. If he departs therefrom, when he returns he will be asked to explain his absence–that is in case you do not capture him."

"It is well, capitán," the sergeant said.

"A simple plot, and effective! He is decoyed to the canyon. Don Miguel utters treason, and you swear that Zorro said the words. You and your men will remember seeing only one Zorro."

"It is all understood, capitán."

"To your duty then!"

Sergeant Pedro Gonzales saluted smartly and hurried to the barracks to issue orders. Capitán Lopez turned to his companion.

"Miguel, you are supposed to be here all evening," he said. "I shall take my orderly and go to the inn, and talk there of Zorro's treason, inflaming men against him. And I shall say, also, that you took too much wine when you dined with me, and are sleeping."

"It is an excellent idea!" Don Miguel said.

"Slip out unseen now, and get into your Zorro garb, and get your black horse from the ravine. Give the troopers ample time to get into position before you appear at the camp of the natives."

Outside the window, crouching close to the adobe wall in the darkness, José of the Cocopahs heard all that. Now he continued to watch for a time, then hurried to the Vega house, and went to a servant's hut in the rear of the patio, as though on an ordinary visit to a friend.

But, a few minutes later, he was inside the house itself, through a secret entrance, explaining the entire affair to Don Diego.

DON Diego paced the floor, his head bent and his hands clasped behind his back, evidently thinking of a plan. Presently, he faced José.

"Zorro rides!"

"Sí, señor!" The native's eyes flashed.

"This time, José, I need your help and that of some of your friends. And there is scant time to prepare matters."

"You have but to command, Don Diego."

"Listen carefully, then." Don Diego spoke at length, in hushed tones. "Now, go and prepare everything," he concluded. "And stand ready for me by the big rock on the San Juan Capistrano trail."

"It shall be as you say, Don Diego."

José departed. That the house might be watched by some of Capitán Lopez's spies worried Don Diego not at all, nor did the presence of family and servants. It was supposed that he had retired early because of his cold, and none of the latter would approach the chamber to trouble him.

He slipped silently along a corridor and down a rear stairway, and, unseen by any, came finally to the great cellar with its storerooms for food and drink. Candle in hand, he went to the rear, and got through the wall where there was false masonry at a tunnel's mouth.

He finally emerged in an adobe hut at the rear of the patio. Then, wrapping a black cloak around him, he darted from shadow to shadow until he was some distance from the house.

Half a mile out of town, in a depression not far from the highway, José of the Cocopahs had the black horse waiting. Don Diego changed garments swiftly, put on his mask and buckled on a blade. Then he muttered further instructions to José, and rode slowly away through the night.

For the present, Don Diego Vega did not exist. Señor Zorro was abroad.

Cautiously, he skirted the edge of the town and neared the inn, riding along the bottom of a ravine and keeping in the shadows. He tethered his horse to a clump of brush where it was quite dark.

Then he went forward afoot, continuing along the ravine, but leaving it presently and going toward the long, low building which housed the inn.

José had informed him that the troopers had ridden away with Gonzales at their head, that Don Miguel Sebastiano had left the presidio. Capitán Lopez and his orderly servant should now be at the inn, the former making talk to carry on the plot.

The rear of the building was in darkness, save where a streak of light came through the partially opened door. Getting near, Zorro peered inside and saw the fat landlord dishing up food.

He slipped through the door like a shadow and glided forward.

SUDDENLY the startled landlord found Señor Zorro standing there at his elbow, his manner threatening, his eyes gleaming through the holes in his mask.

"Silence, or you die!" Zorro hissed at him. "Speak only to answer, and then in whispers. Is Capitán Lopez now in the big room?"

"Sí, señor!" the landlord whispered, shaking with fear.

"What others?"

"One soldier with the capitán, and two travelers who have just come off El Camino Real. They are merchants."

"How is it that you have such scant company tonight?" Zorro demanded.

"There is a cock fight at a hacienda out the San Gabriel trail. Everybody has gone there."

"Go forward now, ahead of me, with your hands held high above your head." Zorro ordered.

The trembling landlord obeyed. They passed through the door and into the big room. Capitán Lopez sat at a table near the fireplace, and his orderly was on a bench in a corner. The two travelers were at another table not far away.

Señor Zorro pricked the fat landlord with the tip of his blade so that the landlord gave a squeal of terror, and thrust him aside. Those in the room turned to look. By the light from the reeking torches and tallow dips, they saw Señor Zorro standing not far from the end of the fireplace.

Now he held a pistol in his left hand, as well as the blade in his right. He took a quick step forward, his eyes seeming to blaze through the holes in his mask.

"Against the wall, capitán!" he ordered. "You others remain as you are."

Capitán Lopez sprang to his feet. "What is this?" he cried. He had been caught at a disadvantage. He had removed belt and sword some time before, and loosened his clothing to be comfortable; the weapon was on another table some distance from him. The trooper was not armed at all.

"It is Señor Zorro, as you know well, though you never have had sight of my face."

"And you dare come here and face me–you, an outlaw?" Lopez cried.

"As you see, señor."

"What is it you wish–to surrender and throw yourself on the mercy of His Excellency?"

"I am still in my right mind, señor el capitán. And His Excellency has no mercy."

"You have come here to murder me, perhaps?"

"I am not a murderer, señor, though you would have people think so of me. Sit on the end of that bench against the wall, and lend ear."

Capitán Lopez obeyed the order, moving slowly and with evident reluctance, thinking swiftly the while. His sword was on the table several feet away. He did not have a pistol in his sash, for he had come to the inn merely to drink and talk of Zorro's treason, anticipating no trouble or duty. And here was Zorro facing him–and he was supposed to be in the canyon inciting natives to rebellion.

Badly frightened, the two merchants were watching and listening. The landlord crouched trembling against the wall. The lone trooper made no move, not caring to advance upon Señor Zorro unless his officer so ordered.

"CAPITÁN Lopez," Zorro said, "according to the learned doctors, it is impossible for a man to be in two places at the same time. Is that not so?"

"Certainly."

"Señor Zorro is standing here before you, and in the plain eyesight of these others, so it is impossible for him to be elsewhere–say in the canyon toward the sea."

"I fail to make sense of what you say."

"Since Señor Zorro is here with you, the man who is busy stirring the natives to rebellion cannot be Zorro. Hence, if Zorro is accused of treason, you will know that the accusation is false."

"And who says Zorro is here?" Lopez asked.

"Have you not eyes, señor! Can you not see me?"

"You?" Capitán Lopez exclaimed. "Ha! I understand this affair now. Señor Zorro, while at his dark work of treason, has a friend appear here in a duplicate of Zorro's raiment, pretending to be he."

"That would, indeed, be a pretty subterfuge," Zorro admitted. "Your meaning is that I am unable to prove that I am the genuine Zorro?"

"Exactly, señor!"

"Ah! But I shall endeavor to leave behind me absolute proof of my identity, señor el capitán."

"And that?" Lopez questioned.

"Is it not possible for you to guess? Have you no wit? Take up your blade from the table, señor," Zorro ordered. "And you others sit quietly

as you are, else this pistol of mine will bark at you. I am about to cross blades with you, señor el capitán."

"You will give me fair fight?" Lopez cried, springing toward the table, hand open to grasp the hilt of his sword and tear it from its scabbard. "I welcome it!"

"I give you fair fight, señor, though I am at a loss to understand why you welcome it. After it is over, His Excellency will be compelled to send yet another officer to the presidio here."

"Ha! You are so certain you will slay me?"

"I have no intention of slaying you, señor. I am only going to leave proof that the real Zorro has been here, that he was not in the canyon preaching rebellion–and that your poor cat's paw was."

Suddenly, Capitán Lopez understood. For an instant, something like fright swept through him. He reeled back against the wall and fought to gain control of himself.

"Zorro always leaves his mark, señor el capitán! Perhaps the bogus one could not do so much."

Chapter Four

THERE was nothing to do now but fight, Capitán Lopez knew. He was an officer, and one of his own troopers was in the room, as well as the fat landlord and two strange travelers, to tell the tale afterward. And there was a possibility that Señor Zorro would not win this combat. Capitán Lopez fancied himself as a master of fence.

But, when the blades crossed and clashed and rang, and he got the first feel of Zorro's wrist, he knew that this fight would be no light bout. He was facing a man who knew how to wield a blade. Caution came quickly to replace the rash rage with which he had at first attacked, and he fell back and fought carefully.

With bulging eyes, the others in the room watched the fighting, aware that Señor Zorro glanced their way frequently, and held pistol ready in his left hand as he fought. The merchants were not of fighting stock, nor was the landlord. The trooper made no move; he would not unless his officer called for help.

"Not bad, capitán!" Zorro cried, as he brushed aside a lunge. "A little too low, señor–" as he parried another. "It is a blade you hold, not a bludgeon."

"You'll not put mark on me!"

" 'Tis scarce a fair time to make a wager, yet I am willing to do so," Zorro said. "If I mark you, let us say, you will leave Reina de Los Angeles, and save the Governor the trouble of recalling you in disgrace."

"I make no wager with an outlaw!"

"Ha!" Señor Zorro's blade suddenly darted forward, and the capitán gave a cry and recoiled. Zorro dropped the point of his blade and stood waiting, laughing a little, scorning to follow up the advantage. " 'Tis only the first cut, señor–the top bar of the Z."

"I shall kill you!"

"It is your rare privilege to try."

Capitán Lopez advanced to the attack again. It was a wild attempt and for a moment Zorro was compelled to retreat, to sidestep, so that a man who did not know fence might have believed he was being hard pressed. But the soldier who sat on the bench in the corner knew that he was only being cautious and waiting for an opportunity.

Presently, it came. The sword of the capitán flashed out of his hand and clattered to the floor. In that same instant, Zorro's blade darted forward again.

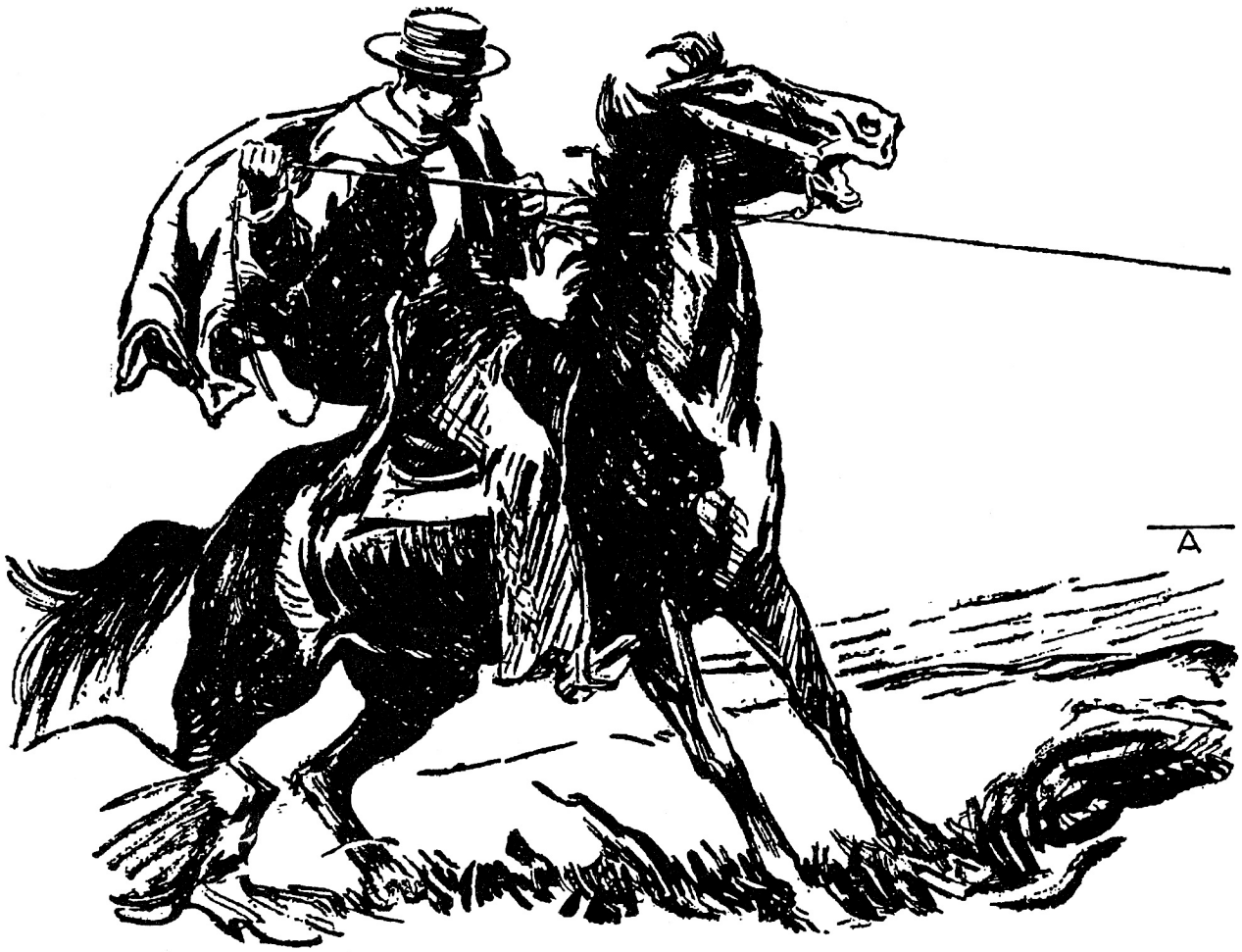
"The lower bar of the Z, capitán," he said. "I join the two bars at my leisure. Pick up your blade, señor, and continue. Do your best, I beg of you, and at least make this combat interesting for me."

CAPITÁN Lopez darted across the room and retrieved his blade from the floor. The flickering light from the nearest torch revealed that his face was ashen, save where blood trickled from his twice-wounded cheek. That Zorro had him at his mercy, he knew well.

But this was a time, Capitán Lopez told himself, when the rules of proper combat need not be observed to the letter. This Zorro was an outlaw, and was not entitled to the treatment one should give a caballero. If he could slay Zorro now, or wound him and take him prisoner, there would be certain rich rewards from the Governor.

"Soldier!" Lopez cried. "Help me take this man! He is an outlaw!"

As he finished his speech, Capitán Lopez charged wildly, his blade a flashing and erratic thing. He confused Zorro for an instant because of his utter disregard of proper method. As Zorro



retreated, the trooper sprang.

The pistol Zorro held barked and flamed. A cloud of smoke swirled in the room. The trooper gave a cry and reeled back to the bench, to drop upon it weakly, clutching at a left shoulder that spouted blood.

Then Zorro pressed the fighting angrily.

"Craven!" he cried. "For that–"

"At him, man!" Lopez roared at the wounded trooper. "He has discharged his pistol. That stool–hurl it at him! Bring him down!"

The trooper lurched to his feet as Zorro compelled the capitán to retreat again. He picked up the heavy stool and hurled it, but Zorro sidestepped swiftly, jerked his head aside, and let the stool fly past him.

"The door!" Lopez cried. "Get help!"

Weakened by the effort in throwing the stool, the wounded trooper staggered toward the door. But Zorro was before him. His blade bit lightly into the trooper's other shoulder, and the man reeled back.

"Now, señor el capitán!" Zorro cried.

He pressed forward again, a trace of anger in his manner. His blade was like a live thing, a flashing menace. Lopez could not stand against it. Again the point darted forward, and again the capitán felt a burn on his cheek. And his own blade was torn from his grasp once more, and clattered to the floor.

"Now you bear my mark, señor," Zorro said, as he leaned against the wall. "Sit down at that table. Be glad that I did not run you through!"

"This is not the end!" Lopez cried. "Though you know it not, Señor Zorro, I have you in a trap."

"I fear no traps." Zorro turned to the trembling landlord. "Get materials, and attend to that soldier's wound," he ordered. "Then bring supper for your two guests. I regret, señores that necessity compelled me to interrupt your meal."

He looked again at the capitán, who was trying to stanch the flow from his wounded cheek, and darted swiftly to the kitchen door.

"Señores, a Dios!" he cried.

And then he was gone.

... Out of the darkness came a rope, hissing and coiling like a serpent ...

THROUGH the shadows he went, and reached the ravine where he had left his horse. He recharged his pistol, meanwhile listening for a din at the hostelry. But there came no outcry.

The soldiers were out at the canyon. The majority of the younger townsmen were at the cock fight down San Gabriel way. And Capitán Marcos Lopez, moreover, did not care to hasten the moment when knowledge of his discomfiture would become public.

Through the moon-drenched night Zorro rode again, unseen, and so came to a ravine which ran around the other side of the town. A soft hiss reached his ears. He stopped the horse.

"Señor!" José of the Cocopahs was before him.

"Everything is in readiness, José?"

"Everything, Señor Zorro. We shall do as you have ordered."

"I see nobody but you."

Soft words came from the lips of José. They penetrated the brush. From behind the shrubs and rocks crept men–furtive natives who approached Zorro as though awed.

"You understand fully?" Zorro asked them, speaking in low tones. "This false man would have led you into trouble. You would have been slain by the soldiers. Never would I counsel you to rebellion, for such a thing is wrong. Be prepared to do as José has instructed you."

They growled and muttered, trusting Zorro fully. José had explained the meaning of the affair to them. Now their hatred was against the man who would have used them for this purpose, though it caused the soldiery to slay them and burn their village.

"You have found his garments?" Zorro asked José.

"They are here, señor, where he changed."

"Send a man with them, far back among the rocks, so they cannot be found quickly. And now go into hiding again, and wait for my signal."

They disappeared like so many shadows. Zorro held his head high, listening. From the far distance came the sounds of a horse's hoofs. Guiding his black deftly, Zorro rode back into the

shadows.

The hoofbeats came nearer. The rider was making little speed, was moving with caution. Yet he wished speed above all else.

Don Miguel Sebastiano had visited the camp of the Calientes again, and had tried to stir them to war. Then he had ridden away, sure that the waiting troopers in ambush had heard him.

He was eager now to change clothing, turn loose his horse, and get back to the presidio. For, only when he had done that, would he be safe. As long as he was abroad in the garb of Zorro, there was a chance of the masquerade being detected.

Into the ravine Don Miguel rode, piloting his horse to the place where he had left his clothes. He stripped saddle and bridle from the animal and turned him loose, and hid the gear behind some rocks. Then he went to the spot where he had left his garments behind a clump of shrubs. A muttering of profanity came from his lips when he saw the clothes were not there. He began searching frantically behind other clumps of shrubs.

"You seek something, señor?" a soft voice asked.

DON Miguel Sebastiano sprang backward, his right hand diving toward the pistol he carried in his sash. But out of the darkness came a rope, hissing and coiling like a serpent, and it fell about him in a noose, and was jerked taut, pinning his arms to his sides.

Then an avalanche of men descended upon him out of the brush and from behind the rocks, natives who smothered him with their weight, who lashed his wrists behind his back.

They carried him to his horse, which they had caught. Saddle and bridle were brought from hiding and put on quickly, and Don Miguel was put into the saddle, and his ankles lashed beneath the mount's belly.

His mask had remained in place during all this. Nor did any one attempt to remove it now. Don Miguel cursed and howled, then began pleading and offered rewards for his freedom, but they answered him not at all.

From the darkness by the rocks came another horse, and he saw a replica of himself, as far as garments were concerned. From behind the mask of this second rider came a chuckle.

"So Señor Zorro has been captured at last! His end will be a pretty one, no doubt. For those who dabble in treason, there is always a rope waiting. There is a fine reward offered by His Excellency for Zorro's capture, too, I believe. These natives may claim it, and be right rich. They will be able to buy fine clothes, in which to dress when they attend your public hanging."

"Whoever you are–" Don Miguel began.

But Señor Zorro waved a hand at the men, and motioned to José of the Cocopahs. Then he turned his horse and rode away through the darkness.

Now the natives put into effect the instructions they had received. Some rushed toward Reina de Los Angeles, shattering the calm night with their cries.

"Zorro is taken!...Señor Zorro is captured!...They are taking him to the presidio!"

The din awoke those who slept, and brought out into the plaza men of prominence, and a few ladies also. The mystery of Zorro had intrigued them. They wished to see the man's face.

Two natives rushed to the presidio, where Capitán Marcos Lopez had gone from the inn, to doctor his cut cheek. Their howls brought him forth.

"Zorro is captured–"

"One of you give me details!" he roared.

One stepped forward. "He was riding his black horse, and stopped where some men were talking. They bound him with ropes and are bringing him here. We share in the reward."

"Where was he caught?" Lopez asked.

"As he was leaving the town by the ravine. They are bringing him here."

Capitán Lopez was hoping that the genuine Zorro had been caught as he was riding away from the inn, but he was worried because Don Miguel had not returned. And another thing worried him–that this matter was to be so public.

Up the slopes from the plaza the men of the pueblo were coming. Among them were dons of importance, who had to be handled with velvet gloves. They would see his wounded face, and know that Zorro had bested him.

They gathered in front of the presidio, under the light of the torches which burned at either side of the entrance. Capitán Lopez retired quickly to his quarters. He bathed his face quickly again, but could not hide the wounds. And the swelling was extremely noticeable.

It was no disgrace to be marked by Zorro, however, so he would go out and face them. Zorro's capture offset everything. He would toss

the natives a few coins, and take the huge reward to himself.

CAPITÁN Lopez strolled through the corridor and to the front door when he heard another din at the corner of the plaza. He greeted the important men of the community with professional dignity.

"The rogue has been preaching sedition," he explained. "My troopers rode out tonight to catch him. Undoubtedly he escaped them, only to be caught by others."

He could see a man on a black horse, with natives leaving the mount and others walking on either side. The rider wore a black cloak, black mask. The shouting natives brought him on, screeching in their excitement.

They stopped the horse inside the light cast by the torches. Some of them rushed toward the capitán.

"Pay the reward to José, and he will share with us all," one said. "We are all Cocopahs."

"I thought Zorro was the friend of the Cocopahs," Lopez said, sneering a bit. "So you betray your friend for gold?"

"He planned an uprising and that is bad," José said, as he strode forward. "Many of us would have died. He escaped your soldiers, señor el capitán, but we captured him."

They brought the horse on, and then Capitán Lopez knew the worst. This rider was garbed much as the real Zorro had been at the inn. But there were slight differences which Lopez noticed. They had captured Don Miguel Sebastiano.

Here was a predicament. Lopez must save this man, to save himself. He thought quickly. If he could get Don Miguel into the prison room without his mask being removed, if he could lock him in, and drive all away, then let Don Miguel out and say that Zorro made an escape, all might be well.

"Untie the man!" Lopez ordered. "Take him from the horse. Leave the rope on his wrists. I'll take him to the prison room."

"Take off his mask!" somebody cried.

Lopez pretended not to hear. He began bellowing orders to the natives. He shouted for his orderly to take charge of the affair, and strode forward himself.

"Back, señores!" he cried. "We can take no chances here. The rogue may have friends among you, and there'll be no rescue!"

"Let us see his face!" some man cried again.

They had unfastened Don Miguel's feet and helped him out of the saddle. They started leading him toward the door. Through the crowd, two men of prominence thrust their way.

"Capitán Lopez! We demand that this man's mask be removed. We would know the identity of Zorro."

"Presently."

"Now!" one thundered.

The other reached out and whipped away the mask. "Don Miguel Sebastiano!" he cried.

Chapter Five

THERE came a chorus of cries as the identity of the prisoner was made known. The crowd surged forward. Capitán Lopez was powerless to do more than bark at them. His one man could not help much, and Sergeant Gonzales and the troopers had not returned from the Caliente village.

"I'll get him into the prison room," Lopez cried. "Stand back, señores! This trooper of mine will help me."

An elderly don, who had some idea of his own regarding Zorro, stepped forward.

"This man is your friend," he accused. "It would be an easy thing for him to escape, under certain conditions."

"Señor, you dare intimate–" Lopez began.

"A few of us will go with you and the prisoner to your own quarters, capitán, and there have an understanding about this affair."

Lopez stormed, but it availed him nothing. They named a committee of men he dared not deny. They brushed aside his protests.

As they went down the corridor to the capitán's room, both Lopez and Don Miguel were trying desperately to think of some way out. The members of the committee kept them apart, so they could not talk.

Lopez had some wild idea of disclaiming knowledge of Don Miguel, other than he had come recommended to him. Not trusting the capitán overmuch, Don Miguel expected that, and was preparing to offset it.

They closed the corridor door, thrust Don Miguel on a bench against the wall. Capitán Lopez sat at his desk, and the men of the committee stood around him.

"There is some mistake," Lopez said.

"How is that, señor el capitán! Here is the man, dressed as Zorro always dresses. He had a mask on his face, and rode a black horse. He fought you in the inn, marked you–"

"Then how could he have been at the canyon talking to the tribesmen?" Lopez asked.

"We do not know. But here we have Zorro, who has done many good things, but who has wiped out them all by trying to create trouble with the natives. He will be guarded carefully, so he cannot escape. We demand, capitán, that you give him immediate military trial, and hang him at the corner of the plaza at sunrise."

"Perhaps it would be better to communicate first with His Excellency."

"His Excellency is in San Francisco de Asis at present, and it would take many, many days for him to be informed. Why bother the Governor with this? You have ample power to prosecute and punish under military law any highwayman or traitor, and this man seems to be both."

"But Don Miguel has but recently come to Reina de Los Angeles," Lopez protested, "and Señor Zorro has been committing his lawless acts hereabouts for more than a year."

"How do we know but what Don Miguel has been in this vicinity for that length of time, perhaps with a hiding place in the hills, or in some native village?"

Capitán Marcos Lopez glanced across the room at Don Miguel, and a look of hopelessness was in the face of each. The capitán decided to fight for time.

"What have you to say for yourself, Don Miguel?" he asked.

Don Miguel's eyes flashed. He had some idea that Capitán Lopez was about to desert him.

"Why not tell them the truth?" he asked. He looked at the committee. "Señores, it is easily explained. The joke is on me–"

"You consider treason a joke, señor?" one barked at him.

"It was a subterfuge, in an attempt to catch Señor Zorro. I was to play at being Zorro, visit the native camp and talk of an uprising. We believed that the real Zorro would hear of it, and go there, and the soldiers catch him. That is all–except that by accident the natives caught me. And the genuine Zorro was there when they did it.

"He was there?" Lopez cried. "Then he knew of our scheme?"

"Evidently," Don Miguel said.

"I see it all now. He fought me at the inn, then hurried out and helped the natives catch you. The thing must be explained to the townsmen. Zorro laughs at us again. I'll take off your bonds, Don Miguel–"

"One moment, señor!" a committeeman protested. "You did not tell this tale at first. Now you are saying there are two Zorros–one false and one real. Let us question the natives who made the capture."

"They will lie," Lopez cried. "They adore this scamp of a Zorro. They will swear Don Miguel's life away."

"We have one Zorro here, and that is enough. If there is another, where is he?"

A voice from the corner answered: "Look this way, señores!"

THERE stood Zorro, blade in hand.

He had ridden back to the presidio, and left his horse behind the building in the darkness. Through an open window he had crawled into the room adjoining the quarters of the capitán, and through an unlocked door he had entered.

"Do not compel me to violence, señores," he said, now. "Stand as you are, please. Keep that pistol from the hands of the capitán!"

Zorro held his own pistol in his left hand, they noticed now, and menaced them with it.

"You have heard the truth," he said. "Don Miguel is not Zorro. He and the capitán were trying to catch me by a trick. That is permissible in the game we play. But to try to make me out a renegade–ah, señores, that is too much!"

"You–" Lopez began.

"Silence, señor el capitán!" Zorro cried. "I have helped the natives at times, have punished those who mistreated them. But never have I counseled them to an uprising. I love them too much for that. They are but simple children, easy victims for unscrupulous men."

"You admit you are Zorro?" Lopez cried.

"Seize him, you men!"

"Be warned!" Zorro cried in return, sweeping the pistol around in front of him. "Señores, this Don Miguel is not Zorro, and cannot be blamed for Zorro's acts. But the fact remains that he uttered treasonable words and tried to stir up the natives. So he is guilty of treason. And should he not be punished for that?"

"That is true," one of the committee said. "And this capitán, who abetted the plot–we shall

see that the Governor recalls him."

"Are you all in league with this highwayman, this outlaw?" Lopez screeched. "You are lawbreakers yourselves if you do not aid me now in his capture."

"I am holding a pistol on them," Zorro observed. "And I have a task here. Don Miguel Sebastiano, we must have a settlement. A man cannot impersonate me and have me called renegade without being called on to account for it."

"You have pistol and blade, and I am unarmed," Don Miguel said.

"I give you fair fight, señor. I ask these señores to see that all is fair. Guard you the capitán, that he does not interfere. Unbind the man's wrists, and give him a blade. At the end of it, you may decide what is to be done with me."

The protests of Capitán Lopez were as nothing. Those of the committee liked the idea. There were some who had suspicion of Zorro's real identity. None liked Don Miguel and his tactics. Here was a chance, moreover, to see swordplay.

So Don Miguel was unbound and given a blade and the draft of wine for which he asked. Capitán Lopez was thrust into a corner and held there. More candles were lit, that the room would be bright with light.

DON Miguel's eyes gleamed strangely, and his tongue moistened his lips as though they suddenly had become parched. It was in his mind to slash at Zorro's mask and reveal the face of the man. It also was in his mind to run Zorro through, thus wiping out this stain and earning the reward of His Excellency.

Capitán Lopez could have told Don Miguel something of the way Zorro handled a blade, but he had no opportunity. Steel rang, and the fighting began.

They felt each other out cautiously. Don Miguel had considerable skill, and Señor Zorro was a man who never made the mistake of underestimating an antagonist. But caution soon gave way to speed, spirited attack and defense.

Don Miguel found himself out-generaled an instant. Zorro's blade scratched his cheek. From the corner, Capitán Lopez gave a cry of warning:

"He's trying to carve his mark on you, Miguel!"

"The upper bar of the Z," Zorro said. "And here is the lower bar, señor!"

Don Miguel gave a great cry of rage, as he felt the tip of the blade bite again. Zorro was prolonging the agony, as he had in the case of the capitán. Usually, that jagged Z was made by one stroke, by the tip of the blade playing over the cheek in a series of quick twists.

"And now, señor–" Zorro said.

But Don Miguel seemed to go insane. He rushed out, cut and slashed and lunged, like a man who knew nothing of fence, trying to overpower his enemy and bear him down. For a moment, Zorro was compelled to fight fiercely to save himself. His footwork accomplished this. Then Don Miguel, winded, his burst of passion spent, was off-guard a moment, and again Zorro's blade bit.

"You wear the Z, señor!" he said; and disarmed his man.

The blade clattered to the floor. Panting, Don Miguel reeled against the wall, waiting for the end. A swift advance, a quick thrust, and it would be over.

But Zorro did not give the thrust. He stepped back, and motioned with the weapon he held.

"Pick up your blade, señor," he said.

Stepping away from the wall, Don Miguel Sebastiano went across the room and retrieved his sword. Again he faced Zorro, the point of his blade down.

"I have marked you, señor," Zorro said. "That is for daring to oppose me. Now, I shall deal with you for your treason, for having me thought renegade, for arousing the poor natives and almost getting them into serious trouble–and for some other things. You fight for life now, Don Miguel Sebastiano!"

Capitán Lopez made a last effort to stop this. He sprang off the bench and started forward.

"Enough!" he cried. "Señores, I call upon you to help me take this man!"

But they tossed him back upon the bench, and warned him to remain there, and turned to watch the fighting.

PERSPIRATION stood out in great globules on the face of Don Miguel. He called upon all the science he knew. But there came to him the realization that he was no match for Zorro.

Every attempt he made was blocked. For every trick, Zorro had defense. Señor Zorro was but playing with him, wearing him down. Through the holes in his black mask, the eyes of Zorro glittered like those of a deadly serpent. Then came a furious onslaught, and Don Miguel gave ground. His lower jaw was sagging and a great fear was in his face. He brought up against the wall, called upon his remaining strength.

Another clash of steel, and Zorro's blade was thrust in the fatal stroke. Don Miguel dropped his sword and gave a sigh. He collapsed slowly to the floor.

Señor Zorro darted forward and bent over him.

"Needlework, señor!" he said, just loud enough for Don Miguel to hear.

"So!" Don Miguel was dying as he spoke. "Capitán!...Señores! This...this man...is–"

But Don Miguel did not speak the word.

Zorro faced the others. "Señores, my work here is done," he said. "Pardon me, if I now make my escape. Remember, señores, I still hold my pistol."

He backed to the door, watching them closely.

From somebody outside came a peculiar cry that made Zorro straighten slightly. And there was a sudden thunder of hoofbeats. Sergeant Gonzales and his troopers had returned from the canyon.

Capitán Marcos Lopez gave a glad cry and sprang off the bench again. He shouted orders for his orderly out in the corridor to hear.

"Warn Gonzales! Zorro is here! Make a capture!"

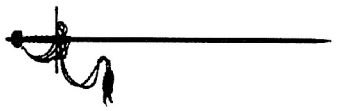
Señor Zorro darted into the adjoining room and closed and barred the door. He was through the window an instant later, and running to the rear of the presidio building, where he had left his horse.

"José!"

"Señor?"

"Into the saddle. Wait a moment, then ride. Decoy them for me."

"Sí, señor!"



THERE was a tumult in front of the presidio. Gonzales was howling to know what had happened. Capitán Lopez got past those of the committee and to the door, rushed into the corridor, and to the front.

"Zorro...here...escaping," he cried. "Gonzales! Leave half your force, pursue with the others!"

At the rear of the building was a sudden clatter as a horse jumped into action. A black streak passed through the moonlight.

"There he goes!"

Capitán Lopez was fairly dancing with excitement and anger as he urged his men after the swift, dark shadow that had already vanished.

Troopers started in pursuit. But it was José of the Cocopahs in the saddle, though they knew it not, and José feared not at all that any of the troopers could overtake the big black. He would out-race them, get to hiding–and Zorro would disappear again.

As for Señor Zorro, he was traveling cautiously from shadow to shadow, skirting the town, and coming down the slope toward his father's house. He got into the hut at the rear of the patio, through the tunnel, and into the house. Working swiftly, he hid his Zorro garb and blade, put on a dressing gown, and threw himself upon his elegant couch.

Completely at ease now, he picked up a volume of poems.

He was soon engrossed.

Back at the presidio, the townsmen scattered. Capitán Marcos Lopez called to him the troopers left behind.

"We surround the Vega casa immediately," he said. "Any one who seeks to enter must be stopped. Perhaps we yet shall catch the fox, if Gonzales fails in the chase."

The commandante had lost much this night, and he was determined not to fail in this final opportunity. So he swiftly ordered his troopers to their horses, his voice breathless and strident.

They galloped across the plaza and took station, some in front, some in rear, and some on either side. In the moonlight, their movements were seen clearly. Word flashed through Reina de Los Angeles that the Vega house was being watched by the soldiery.

Capitán Marcos Lopez himself remained in front, watching and waiting. But he did not have long to wait. The big front door of the house was

opened. Two servants appeared holding huge candelabra. And then, through the open door, came Don Diego's proud, white-haired father, and Don Diego himself was a step behind him.

"Capitán Lopez!" the head of the Vega house called. "Do me the kindness to take your soldiers away. They are disturbing my household. We do not need their protection."

"Protection?" Lopez gasped.

This was too much.

"Could they possibly be here for any other reason?" Don Diego's father demanded. "If so, be good enough to state that reason!"

He stood there erect and magnificently cool, his eyes fixed on the commandante; and his son behind him was properly grave. Quite obviously these gentlemen were not to be crossed.

Lopez hesitated only an instant. "They shall be removed, señor."

He was outwitted in some manner, he knew. There was Don Diego standing in the doorway. No use to guard the house to catch him entering it, when he was inside already.

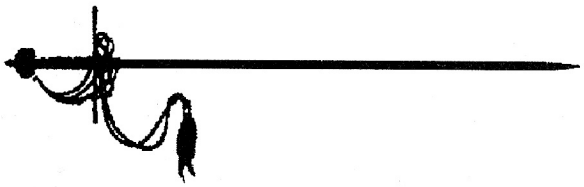
And now Don Diego brushed his nostrils with a scented handkerchief, and sneezed a bit, and spoke:

"It appears, señor el capitán, that something has happened to your face. You have been playing roughly, perhaps, and got it scratched. But those who play roughly may expect to be hurt. That is the way of life.

Buenas noches, capitán!"

Mysterious Don Miguel

The keen blade and rapier wit of Señor Zorro were legend in Spanish California–and there was dire need of them now!



Chapter One
Don Nameless

THE hourglass had run its course several times since the twinkling candles had ceased casting their erratic beams through the windows of the houses. The reeking torches had been extinguished in the adobe huts of the natives. The night watch had given his eerie call so often that now it was half stifled by a yawn, and, instead of the stentorian call of the early evening, was a thing with no ring of authority in it.

A bright moon streaked the tumbling waters of the bay. In from the distant sea wandered a soft breeze to stir the fronds of the palms around the little plaza in San Diego de Alcála, and to be welcomed by the weary troopers who stood their shift of guard at the presidio.

Before the hourglass had run its course twice more, the pink dawn would come stealing in from the east and the business of another day would begin.

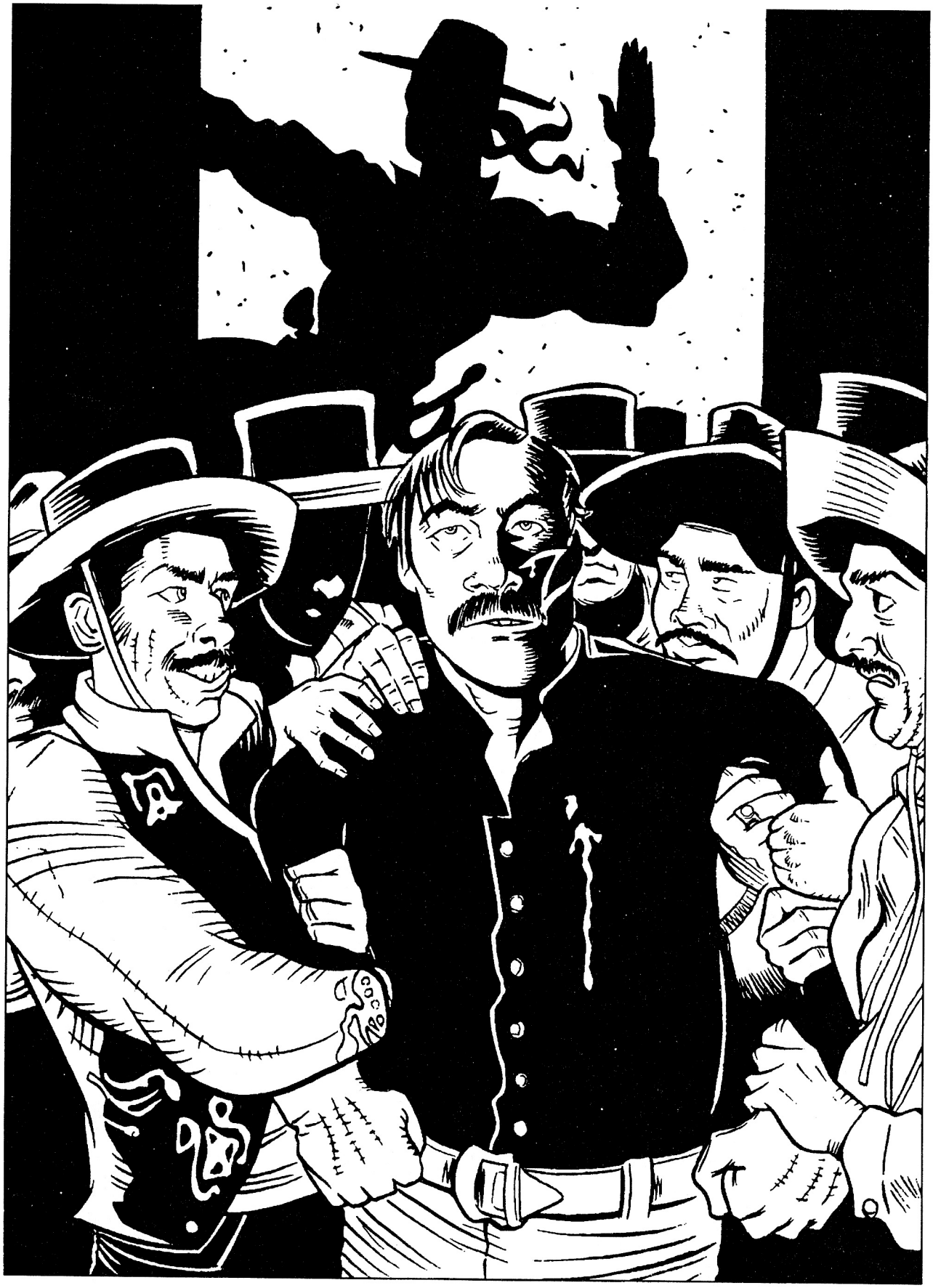
Droves of stock–cattle and horses and sheep–would be driven in for trading. Hides and tallow, jars of honey and preserved fruits would be brought in for barter. Heavy carts would come into the town along the dusty trails from many a hacienda.

At the mission up the valley, robed Franciscan brothers would be up and busy at their eternal work of changing gentile natives into neophytes, and of building up the mission empire their own Junipero Serra had founded. But, in the large main room of the inn at the corner of the plaza, were some who did not seem to realize that the night was far spent already.

They had neglected to eat the food the fat landlord had prepared for them long before. Their fine garments were damp with perspiration induced by excitement and the rich wine they had taken, and their flushed faces wore strained expressions as they watched closely over a long table which had a huge candelabra at either end.

Pedro Pico, the professional gambler, was playing for high stakes again. He was also winning heavily and steadily, and certain of the young caballeros who demeaned themselves by dicing with him were seeking to catch him in some act of clever crookedness, but could not.

Pedro Pico's lean and swarthy face was inscrutable as he played. His eyes were small and black and glittering. His white hands and tapering fingers were no less than things of beauty, adorned with precious jewels which scintillated in the light, as he manipulated either dice or the cards, as the others requested, but both to his own material advantage.



He would bear that jagged letter Z, the mark of Zorro, to the grave with him.

ABOUT a score of men were in the big, dimly lighted main room of the inn. Some were young caballeros who had ridden in from their fathers' estates for a night of sport in the town. Others were but common folk of San Diego de Alcála. And there were several of uncertain standing, who had lately come off El Camino Real, the King's Highway which connected the missions in a chain, and who looked like rogues, and probably were.

"By the saints–!"

One dressed in fine raiment spoke as another cast of the dice went to his disadvantage, and retreated from the gaming table to wipe the perspiration from his face with a square of silk edged with lace.

"The saints, señor, have nothing to do with it," another whispered into his ear. "It is my private opinion that the Evil One has forsaken his usual abode and is with us here tonight in this land of California."

"Ha! It is impossible for one to slay the Devil, it is said, and yet–"

"Do not stain your blade by allowing it to drink foul blood," his friends advised quickly. "There is no law that one must play with the man."

"Yet one must play with somebody, and at times one likes to have dealings with a professional rogue, for the sake of the experience."

"Any robed Franciscan at the mission will tell you that a man must pay dearly for experience."

"And have I not paid dearly? Ha! A full purse of gold gone this night, and one the night before! At this rate I soon shall be beggared. It is beyond belief that one man can have so much good fortune, yet, if it is more than mere luck, we cannot probe his artifice."

The gaming continued. The fat landlord and his two native servants kept the wine mugs filled. Some of the men dozed on the benches. Others grew maudlin and spoke meaningless phrases. But Pedro Pico always remained sober and alert. The young caballeros continued losing to him, and in return got nothing but his flashing smile, and no man could tell whether that was of friendliness or derision.

There were no troopers from the presidio present at the inn tonight, for they were being held closely in barracks against a sudden alarm, as they had been for several nights past. There had been whisperings of an incipient Indian uprising, fomented by a certain and somewhat mysterious Don Miguel Mendez, regarding whom no man seemed to know much.

The torches spluttered in their niches in the walls, and cast their streaks of uncertain light across the broad room, but the gaming table was well lighted by the two huge candelabra. Those in the place who were not too intoxicated had gathered to watch the high play. Among them was a certain Valentino Vargas, a person of evil visage and uncouth manners, who appeared to be the gambler's bosom friend.

Their interest was centered on the dicing. Hence, they did not observe it when, in out of the moon-drenched night, slipped a man who surveyed the scene and chuckled a bit, and then crept slowly and with much caution along the wall and through the shadows, until he was standing beneath the wall torch nearest the gambler's table. For a time he watched the game, and then:

"Attention, señores!"

His voice suddenly rang out, so that the echoes of it bounded back from the adobe walls and sounded up and down the big, low-ceilinged room.

THE gambling ceased abruptly. All in the room whirled to face him. Before them, standing against the wall with his arms folded across his breast, was a man who wore neither hat nor cloak. His blouse of black silk was open at the throat. He had a blade at his side, and a dagger in his girdle, and even a pistol in his sash. Over his face was a closely fitting mask of black, which concealed his features effectually.

"What–?" Pedro Pico began.

The gambler's lower jaw sagged and his eyes bulged in an expression of astonishment. His first thought was that here was some highwayman come to take what gold he might find on the gambling table.

"Your pardon, señores," the masked visitor begged. "It is my wish to try a cast or two of the dice, and also my wish that my identity be concealed from you all. Have I your permission to advance to the table?"

Pedro Pico's eyes glittered evilly as he watched the masked man. This was not to be an affair of robbery, then. The gambler gathered his wits and made a grand gesture.

"All are welcome to play here, if they have the gold with which to play," he said.

"As to that, you need have no worry," the masked man replied.

The others fell back toward the lower end of the table. The masked man strode forward into the brighter light, moving with the natural grace of the cougar, and stopped directly across the table from Pedro Pico.

Valentino Vargas, the gambler's friend, lurched to his feet from the bench whereupon he had been sitting, a sneer on his lips as he swaggered forward.

"Ha! So here we have a man who fears to reveal his face," Valentino Vargas said.

"Some faces are better masked," the visitor replied. "Why do you not mask yours, señor, and spare the good people the sight of your evil countenance?"

Some of the men in the room laughed, and the evil countenance of which the masked man had spoken took on a tinge of purple as wrath surged through Valentino Vargas.

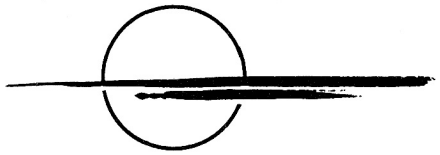
"How is this?" Vargas cried, enraged, as he allowed his hand to drop to the hilt of the blade he wore. "You seek to insult me, señor?"

"Peace, Valentino! You courted that rebuke," Pedro Pico barked at him quickly. " 'Tis not a time for fighting." He made a sign that Vargas was to be quiet.

For this masked man was a mystery Pedro Pico certainly wished to solve. Perhaps this unusual visitor who had come out of the night was some man of high degree with an itch for dice and the cards, yet did not wish it known that he played with a common gambler in a public place. Pedro Pico had encountered many such in his career. A man of that ilk might have much gold which could be taken easily.

The young caballeros had backed away from the table, and were observing the masked man askance, holding themselves haughtily aloof. Now he turned and saluted them in a respectful manner.

"No man here need turn his back or depart because of my presence," he assured them. "Without speaking my name, I give you honorable oath that my blood is as good as that of any man here. Now, Señor Gambler, we begin."



HE TOSSED a fat pouch-purse down upon the table. He opened it and drew forth and threw out some pieces of gold, revealing that there were plenty more such in the purse. Pedro Pico's eyes glittered yet more at this frank display of wealth. He prepared to make the first cast of the dice at the masked man's gesture for him to do so.

Pedro Pico made his cast, and the masked stranger stepped closer to the table and picked up the box. Then he took the dice from Pedro Pico's hand, for the gambler had picked them up and offered them.

But, with the box held aloft, the masked man paused. He dropped the dice to the table without shaking and began a close inspection of the cubes. Those around the table bent forward, breathlessly and silently, to watch, sensing that something unusual was about to occur.

"Some queer things happen at times," the masked stranger said. "These dice are not those with which you made your cast, Señor Gambler."

"What is this?" Pedro Pico cried.

"The dice you cast–one had a tiny nick on a corner, which did not escape my eye. No doubt you have those dice cleverly concealed about your person now, having exchanged them for these. I do not doubt that you have been winning heavily during the night, señor, from those foolish enough to play with you."

Pedro Pico sprang to his feet. He bent across the table, his eyes aflame and his face suffused with rage. He was well aware of the dire necessity of making a swift defense against this charge of cheating.

"You dare insinuate–?" he began.

"I insinuate nothing!" the masked man interrupted, speaking in stern voice. "I merely state facts. You are nothing more than a common cheat! I knew it when you made your cast. You are not even a clever cheat. I have heard rumors of your heavy winnings here in San Diego de Alcála, and came to learn the reason for them. The reason is now apparent."

"I'll slay you for this!" Pedro Pico cried.

The gambler had a sword with a jeweled hilt, in an engraved scabbard, which he always kept on the bench beside him while he was playing. Now he grasped the scabbard and whipped out the blade, and sprang aside and into the well-lighted space at the end of the table.

"I lower myself exceedingly to cross blades with such as you," the masked man declared.

"But my features are hidden, and I shall call myself Don Nameless, so my shame shall not be so great. I warn you, Señor Gambler, that I am expert with a blade. You still desire to fight with me? On guard, then, señor!"

Chapter Two
A Mark Left Behind

AT THE end of the table they clashed. The caballeros stood back gleefully, bending forward to watch with keen eyes this display of swordsmanship. The others got back against the adobe wall out of the way. A dishonest gambler was about to be sorely punished, they hoped.

That this mysterious Don Nameless was expert with a blade, as he had stated, could he told in an instant. He pressed Pedro Pico back until the gambler was in the shadows. He compelled him to retreat continually, played with him until big globules of perspiration popped out on Pedro Pico's swarthy face and the fear of immediate death shook him.

They circled toward the end of the table again, while the others retreated to give them room. Don Nameless was laughing lightly as he fought, like a man teasing a boy. Pedro Pico made a last desperate attempt to save his life, suddenly forcing the swordplay in a wild attack which had nothing in it of fencing science. But this man who called himself Don Nameless only laughed behind his mask again, and parried and fell back an instant. Then he began forcing the fighting furiously himself.

Back toward the adobe wall he drove Pedro Pico, having his way with the man. The gambler knew that he was lost. Each instant he expected the thrust which would let the life out of his body. His face became drawn and white, and his lips trembled.

Suddenly their hilts were locked. Their arms were held aloft as their breasts crashed together. So they stood face to face, breathing heavily, and each straining to gain the advantage.

"I'll slay you–slay you!" Pedro Pico cried wildly.

The answer of Don Nameless came in a whisper which nobody but Pedro Pico could hear:

"If you do, it may grieve Don Miguel."

Pedro Pico seemed to lose all strength suddenly. His eyes grew wide, but the masked man kept the hilts of their swords locked, and pretended to be exerting his strength, so the others in the room were misled.

"You–*you* are Don Miguel?" Pedro Pico whispered, as their faces were close together.

"Let us say a trusted man of his."

"Then, why did you expose me?"

"To give you a good excuse for quitting San Diego de Alcála immediately and in a natural manner. There is to be a meeting in the Canyon of the Cocopahs, near Reina de Los Angeles, the night of the full moon. Pass the word to others of whom you are sure, and see to it yourself."

None of the others in the room had heard this whispered conversation of the two men against the wall. They were watching for the deadlock to be broken, and wondering whether a quick thrust by this Don Nameless would end the duel when the break finally came. And now the duelists sprang apart and were back in the bright circle of light at the end of the table. But Pedro Pico suddenly threw up his left arm and lowered the point of his blade.

"Enough, señor!" he cried. "The right of this affair is with you. I am lost if I continue."

It was the speech of a craven. Expressions of disgust came from those in the room, caballeros and common folk alike. Pedro Pico, his head hanging as though in shame, walked slowly back toward his table.

Men drew aside to let him pass, as though touch with him might contaminate them. Pedro Pico was hoping that he could gather the money from the table and depart, and get away without being set upon and beaten.

SOME men did start toward him angrily and threateningly, rumblings of rage coming from their throats as they thought of the money of which they had been robbed. But Don Nameless lifted a hand and called a halt.

"Allow the rogue to depart and take his stench with him," he ordered. "You knew that he was a professional gambler, hence played with him at your own peril. It is enough that he is now unmasked, and must leave San Diego de Alcála forever."

But Valentino Vargas sprang off the stool upon which he dropped in consternation at Pedro Pico's show of cowardice. That bogus struggle against the wall had misled him. He thought this Don Nameless a man of little strength, since even

Pedro Pico had held the hilt of his blade locked for so long. Here was a chance, he thought, to avenge his friend and also acquire a reputation for himself.

Valentino Vargas was a heavy man, with a florid face and a huge black mustache, strong in his shoulders and arms. Beside this Don Nameless, who was small and agile, he looked like a human mountain.

"So you quit him, Pedro Pico?" he cried. " 'Tis a pity. But I'll take up your quarrel. I am not craven. This pretty fellow who wears a mask–the shape of his body distresses me. I'll carve it more to my liking."

"I have no quarrel with you, fellow," Don Nameless said.

"Ha! No doubt you prefer not to have one, nevertheless one is now on your hands," Valentino Vargas replied. "Face a real man for once, señor! On guard!"

"As you will," Don Nameless replied. "Some men go about the earth seeking trouble."

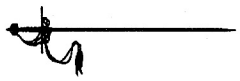
Those in the room promptly forgot Pedro Pico now. They turned to watch this fresh quarrel, which gave promise of being something better than the last. The gambler quickly gathered up his property and crept around the walls and into the patio, to go to his own quarters in the inn.

Valentino Vargas strutted out into the light space at the end of the table. He whipped out his blade and ponderously set himself for combat. Don Nameless darted forward immediately, and they engaged.

Valentino Vargas was a much better swordsman than Pedro Pico by far, having more skill and also weight and strength. It occurred to those who watched that Don Nameless estimated him correctly as such, and was not rash in his attack.

But, having felt out his man, Don Nameless suddenly began to force the fighting, as though eager to finish it and be gone from the scene. The blades crashed and rang. The duelists swerved and danced, advanced and retreated, now out in the streak of bright light, and now back in the flickering shadows near the adobe wall.

"Fight, rogue!" Don Nameless taunted, as he pressed his adversary cruelly. "I had no quarrel with you...you brought this upon yourself, rogue...I could slay you easily...but perhaps I'll spare your life."



HE SPOKE all this haltingly, as they fought. He punctuated his phrases with swift and violent attacks. Valentino Vargas began tiring from the speed of the bout. This small and agile man was all around him, like a dozen adversaries. There was a strong rally on the part of Valentino Vargas for a moment, a retreat on the part of Don Nameless and an equally swift recovery.

Then something happened so swiftly that the caballeros watching were unable to tell afterward just how it had occurred. But the blade of Valentino Vargas was torn from his hand and whipped in a flashing arc through the air, to fall and clatter on the hard-beaten earth of the floor.

Don Nameless lunged, and the point of his blade darted forward like the tongue of a snake. Then he bounced backward like a rubber hall, and Valentino Vargas reeled against the wall, holding his left hand to his left cheek, from which blood was streaming.

The watchers marveled that Don Nameless had not slain, a thing he could have done easily. But he only gave a swift glance at the others in the room, as though to see whether they would make a move against him. None did, so he darted to the table, and grasped his purse and stowed it away.

He laughed a little, returned his blade to its scabbard, and retreated swiftly along the wall through the shadows, as those in the room surged toward him.

At the door he lifted a hand in salute.

"Señores, á Dios!" he cried.

Through the open door he hurried, to be swallowed by the moon-drenched night. The others in the place rushed out after him, except a few who remained with the wounded man. They heard the rapid drum-fire of a horse's hoofs as Don Nameless swiftly rode away. Back to their ears on the night breeze came a taunting laugh.

Inside the inn, some men gathered around the wounded Valentino Vargas, who was cursing both Don Nameless and his wound. The young caballeros stood aloof and laughed at the man. The fat landlord came hurrying in with a basin filled with heated and scented water, and some soft cloths, and bathed Valentino Vargas' left cheek, where the tip of Don Nameless' sword had cut deeply enough to make a wound which surely would leave a scar.

One of the caballeros gave a cry of surprise and darted forward, and bent over to look.

His exclamation brought the others to his side.

"Dios!" he cried. "We have been blind! Look at this fellow's wound. Do you not see, and understand? It is in the form of a ragged letter Z, is it not? 'Tis the mark of Zorro! This Don Nameless, as he called himself–he was Señor Zorro! We have seen a master of fence at work–and have seen him leave his mark behind!"

Chapter Three
Don Diego Arrives

IN PEDRO Pico's room at the inn, as dawn was breaking, the gambler sat on the side of his couch, while Valentino Vargas strode back and forth before him.

"I cannot understand it," Vargas was saying. "You say he spoke of Don Miguel?"

"He intimated he was Don Miguel's trusted man, and said there was to be a meeting–"

"You have said that before. He exposes you, fights with you, makes it easy for you to get out of the town–"

"Which I must do at once, before they have a mind to set upon me," Pedro Pico said, betraying nervousness.

"Then when I pick a fight with him, he makes this mark of Zorro on my cheek. Why did he not mention Don Miguel to me?"

"Perhaps you had angered him," Pedro Pico said. "And it is possible he did not have a chance, for you were fighting fiercely. He may have thought I would pass the word to you. Or, he may not have known you are in this affair."

"I have yet to meet a man who has seen this Don Miguel," Vargas said. "How this started, none seems to know. A few whisperings to adventurers of our kind, and the thing spread.

"Don Miguel Mendez–whoever he is–is fomenting an uprising. There will be loot for all white men he picks to help handle the Indians–"

"We were sought out," Pico interrupted.

"By a man sought out by somebody else, who had been sought out in turn. This Don Miguel certainly keeps to cover."

"Until everything is prepared, perhaps. He may be some man of high degree, irked by politics, who does not wish his identity known until it is time to strike. No doubt he will be at the meeting in the Canyon of the Cocopahs."

"And this Zorro–?" Vargas questioned.

"It is true you do not know of him, since you but lately arrived by ship from Mexico. This Señor Zorro made his appearance some time ago, and worked his will with the soldiery. He punished those who mistreated natives and monks–"

"Ah, I have heard, but did not know the name! So it was this Señor Zorro who mentioned Don Miguel to you, and also put his mark on me?"

" 'Tis a way he has–marking the letter Z on the cheeks of men with whom he fights but does not wish to slay."

"This Señor Zorro, it then appears, is in league with Don Miguel?"

"And why not, señor, my friend? Has he not always aided the natives? He may even be Don Miguel himself–who knows? And what difference does it make?"

"I have cast my lot with this Don Miguel," Vargas replied. "But this Señor Zorro is another matter. He has put his mark on me, and for that I shall surely kill him at our next meeting."

"You have tasted his blade once, as have I. What chance would you have in combat?"

"A pistol ball from behind a rock–" Vargas suggested. "It is in my mind that I shall have no rest until I slay the man. Now, what is it you intend to do?"

"I must get from the town," Pedro Pico declared. "I'll pack my valuable things and get my horse and ride, leaving my other property here. I'll make for Reina de Los Angeles, so as to be at the meeting the night of the full moon."

"We have other business," Vargas reminded him. "How about this Don Felipe Ramón and his daughter, newly come by ship from Spain?"

DESPITE the situation, Pedro Pico laughed a bit.

Don Felipe Ramón, a grandee if ever there was one, had lately arrived with his fair daughter, Carmelita, and an old duenna, Señora Vallejo.

They were to journey to Reina de Los Angeles, to be the guests of Don Diego Vega and his father. It was whispered that Don Diego was to wed the fair Carmelita, if they took a fancy to each other.

But Don Felipe Ramón, carrying much wealth with him, feared highwaymen and bandits. He was waiting in the guest house at the mission up the valley, until Don Diego arrived. This Don Diego Vega, his father being at odds with those in political power, could not obtain an escort of troopers for his friends.

So some gentry of the road, of whom Valentino Vargas was one, waited now like hawks to pounce upon their prey.

If Don Felipe Ramón journeyed to Reina de Los Angeles without escort, somewhere along the way his entourage would be set upon, and he would be robbed gleefully.

"Don Diego Vega is expected soon," Pedro Pico said, "according to rumor. Perhaps he will bring an army of servants with him."

"Natives will run at the first discharge of a pistol," Vargas declared. "We fear only the soldiery, and they will not protect Don Diego or any of his friends. It will be rich picking, my friend. Go your way out of the town, and I'll remain and watch. Our four friends, in this enterprise with us, are watching also. Don Felipe Ramón cannot slip away, by day or by night. When he moves, we have his gold and jewels."

"If the native uprising comes–"

"All the better. It will be a cover for what we do. The natives will be blamed for it."

"You'll be at the meeting the night of the full moon?"

Valentino Vargas swore a great oath. "You may depend upon it. I desire to meet this Señor Zorro again."

" 'Tis in my mind that you'd best avoid him."

" 'Tis in my mind to slay him before I'm done, and that I'll do," Valentino Vargas declared.

"When I have at him again, he has marked his last man. I'll carve a letter V, not on his cheek, but in the heart of him! I'll make a mark of my own! I'll–"

He ceased speaking abruptly. There was a slight commotion in front of the inn.

Natives were yelping like so many curs, and the shrill voice of the fat landlord could be heard.

Pedro Pico sprang to his feet, his face livid, and reached for the pistol he had ready on a stool near by.

"They are coming for me," he mouthed. "I'll sell my life dearly."

"Peace, fool! It is but somebody arriving," Valentino Vargas said. "Somebody of quality, no doubt, with all that fuss being made. Let us see."

"I must get from the town."

"In due time. There is no need for haste. The caballeros you fleeced are sleeping off their wine, and the common louts will not bother you. Let us see."

They left the room and hurried across the patio, and to a doorway through which they could peer across the big main room and out the front door.

A **SPLENDID** carriage had been brought to a stop in front of the inn. Cringing natives surrounded it, and a native servant was standing in the front of the carriage and threatening them with a whip. The vehicle was drawn by four splendid black horses. Two native outriders accompanied it.

The servile landlord struck natives aside and got to the step of the carriage, and bowed low. Then the occupant came from beneath the hood, and Pedro Pico and Valentino Vargas caught sight of him.

"What a fop!" Vargas said. "He acts as though he scarcely can hold himself together."

"Look at the coat of arms on the carriage," Pedro Pico whispered.

"I know it not."

"I do know it. This is Don Diego Vega arrived."

"That–*that*–is the scion of the house of Vega?" Valentino Vargas asked, gasping. "By the saints! So this is an example of noble blood! The fellow acts as though about to swoon. The sight of blood would sicken him. A needle such as the women use for embroidery would be more at home in his hand than a blade."

Don Diego Vega was conducted by the landlord from the carriage and into the inn, and the door was slammed in the face of the rabble of natives, all seeking alms.

Don Diego Vega brushed his nostrils with a scented handkerchief, and gave a little sigh. He sat upon the nearest bench, and one of the servants made haste to bring a mug of the best wine. As the landlord hovered near, rubbing his hands and giving his poor smile, Don Diego Vega drank sippingly, and sighed again.

"These be turbulent times," he said, in a thin voice.

"Sí, señor!"

"I rested at the hacienda of a friend, and came on before the dawn. It has been a long and tiresome journey from Reina de Los Angeles. But it was necessary. I have another carriage following, an empty one, but it is to go to the mission direct."

"Sí, señor!" the landlord agreed, not knowing what else to say, but feeling the need of saying something.

"I have come to meet Don Felipe Ramón and his daughter, as perhaps you know. They await me at the guest house at the mission. They, too, have had a long journey–all the way from Spain by ship, to make their new home here in California."

"Sí, señor!"

"You will fetch me some honey and such poor bread as you have in your inn."

"No meat, Don Diego?"

"A bit of bread and honey–that is enough. I seldom eat meat. Such food is for men of turbulent manners, men who brawl and try feats of strength and skill. I tend more to philosophy and the poets."

"Sí, señor!" the landlord agreed. "At once, Don Diego!"

The landlord clapped his hands and hissed at his servants, and hurried to his kitchen.

The servants quickly spread one of the tables with a fine cloth, and put several fine dishes upon it, and a bowl of fruit, and bowed low when Don Diego Vega went to the table and sat down.

One brought a basin filled with warm, scented water, and a cloth, and bathed Don Diego's white hands, as though he had been a helpless infant, and dried them. Then Don Diego sighed again and relaxed, and awaited his bread and honey.

"By the saints!" Valentino Vargas muttered in the doorway. "So this is the man who has come to escort Don Felipe Ramón to Reina de Los Angeles! This man and a few native servants–not more than three or four at the most! The task we have set ourselves seems no task at all. What gold and jewels this Don Felipe Ramón carries belongs to us already."

Chapter Four
Concerning A Nut

HAVING refreshed himself with bread and honey and wine, Don Diego Vega tossed the fat landlord a coin and arose to depart. He held his scented kerchief to his nostrils as he walked slowly and languidly through the lane the landlord made for him in the midst of the natives waiting outside, and got into his carriage. He relaxed, and sighed.

The carriage had no driver, but two natives rode the horses of the lead team. Two outriders followed behind, natives whose arrogant manner demonstrated that they knew whom they served. In a cloud of dust the vehicle swept around the plaza and took the trail which ran up the valley to the mission.

While Don Diego Vega had been inside the inn, the second carriage had passed, swathed in dust cloths and empty, and it had two outriders also. This was to convey Don Felipe Ramón and his daughter and her duenna from San Diego de Alcála to Reina de Los Angeles, where the Vegas had a splendid casa.

The carriage slowed as the horses were brought down to a walk to ascend a sharp slope, and Don Diego extended a hand outside, and one of the outriders galloped up beside him.

"Bernardo," Don Diego said, "you will keep your eyes and ears open after the mission is reached. You will have my black horse ready always, and you will be watching closely for any signal from me. It is understood?"

Don Diego glanced up, and the man Bernardo nodded that it was understood. He could not speak, for he was dumb. He was the faithful servant of Don Diego Vega, and knew many secrets, yet could tell none. Nor would he have done so had he a tongue, but would have allowed that tongue to be cut out of his mouth first.

Bernardo retired to his regular position at Don Diego's gesture for him to do so, and the carriage reached the top of the hill, and the horses went forward at a gallop. So they came to the mission which Junipero Serra had founded, with its splendid adobe buildings, its chapel and patio and guest house and storehouses, and servants hurried forward to catch the bridles of the horses and help to hold them still.

Don Diego Vega descended from his carriage, his manner as languid as usual, to be met by a

gray-haired old monk, who gave him an immediate blessing.

"I am Brother Marcus, my son. Let me make you welcome to San Diego de Alcála. Your friends await you in the guest house, and I'll conduct you there. Your horses will have careful attention."

Don Diego followed him across the patio and beneath the arches to the guest house. This Don Felipe Ramón was an old friend of his father's, a boyhood friend in Spain, and Don Diego never had seen him.

AT HIS entrance, a dignified nobleman arose and stepped forward to meet him. Behind him a beautiful señorita sat on a bench, busy with her embroidery frame, a grim-faced duenna beside her. The glance of Don Diego strayed there an instant, and the little señorita blushed and bent lower over her embroidery, though that did not prevent her lifting her eyes.

"Don Diego, I would have known you for the son of my old friend anywhere," Don Felipe Ramón declared. "You are exactly like he was at your age."

"I thank you, Don Felipe. My father sends his regards, and directs me to escort you and the others to Reina de Los Angeles."

Let me present my daughter, Carmelita, then we may talk."

Señorita Carmelita Ramón acknowledged the introduction with a smile and a blush, though she seemed perturbed because Don Diego made no great show of gallantry. At a sign from her father, she then retired with her duenna to another chamber, and Don Diego and Don Felipe sat on a bench in a corner of the room.

"This journey to Reina de Los Angeles–how far is it?" Don Felipe asked.

"About four or five days, señor."

"Through rough country, no doubt?"

"We make stop each evening at some hacienda, where you will be a welcome guest. It has been arranged."

"But as we travel during the day–they tell me bandits are abroad in this land."

"There are always such blackguards abroad," said Don Diego, "but I pray you be not alarmed because of them. I shall protect you, Don Felipe."

Don Felipe glanced at him, and the expression in his face seemed to say that he doubted it exceedingly. This Don Diego Vega was of good blood, but did not seem the sort to be able to protect anybody.

"You have armed servants?" Don Felipe asked.

"Two carriages, señor, with two riders and two outriders to each. The outriders carry pistols, but are afraid to use them because of the noise and flame they make. They probably would run if highwaymen descended upon us."

"By the saints, Don Diego! I carry gold and jewels with me," Don Felipe said, lowering his voice.

"I judged as much, señor. No doubt some of the highwaymen have judged likewise."

"An escort of soldiery, perhaps–?"

Don Diego smiled. "I am afraid not, but I shall try. My father is the outspoken foe of the present Governor, and His Excellency's soldiers would grin if we were robbed."

"What are we to do, Don Diego? Frankly, you did not seem to realize the peril. My gold, my jewels–my daughter! Are all to be subjected to danger?"

"Perhaps," said Don Diego, "there are influences working in our behalf. Be not alarmed, I pray you, Don Felipe. Let us be prepared to start tomorrow at dawn. I have been up most of the night, and require some rest. Do you and the señorita get good rest today also. This evening we shall meet to dine."

"If we reach your father's house in Reina de Los Angeles without having our throats cut, it will surprise me," Don Felipe said. "Why was I not content to remain in Spain?"

"Before we reach my father's house you will love this new land, Don Felipe."

"If I am not first sent to that land from which none returns," Don Felipe replied. "We meet, then, for the evening meal."

BROTHER Marcos appeared, and conducted Don Diego to a room assigned for his use, and made him comfortable, and retired. But Don Diego Vega did not sleep. He had sent one of his men to the presidio with a note as they had approached the town, and now was awaiting a reply to it.

The reply came. A rider galloped up to the mission. In a stentorian voice he bade a native care for his horse. He strode into the patio with his head held high, spurs jingling and sword-clanking, and addressed a monk who bowed before him.

"Where is this Don Diego Vega? I want speech with him."

"He has retired, capitán."

"Show me his resting place."

Don Diego opened the door of his room and stepped out beneath one of the arches.

"I am here, capitán," he called.

The officer strode toward him, scowling. He was a young man for the rank, and plainly aware of his station and importance. He saluted Don Diego in haphazard fashion, and entered the room.

"I received your message, and I am here," he said. "Though I fail to see why I should come running at your nod. I am Capitán Carlos Gonzales, at present stationed in San Diego de Alcála. But I have just received my transfer to Reina de Los Angeles, and may leave for my new post at any time."

"You know of the presence here of Don Felipe Ramón and his party?" Don Diego asked.

"I do."

"It is known to you also that I have come to conduct them to Reina de Los Angeles?"

"It is."

"These be turbulent times," said Don Diego. "There is continual danger of robbery on the highway. Don Felipe has gold and jewels, and a daughter. I request a suitable military escort, capitán, to insure the safety of the party."

"I regret, Don Diego, that such an escort cannot be furnished. The men are being held in barracks. There are rumors of another uprising of the natives. Some renegade whites, headed by a certain Don Miguel–"

"All the more reason for giving us protection," Don Diego interrupted. "I'm afraid, capitán, that I must insist."

"Insist?" Capitán Carlos Gonzales roared. "I say you cannot have an escort. If you object to my decision, take it up with His Excellency the Governor at Monterey."

Don Diego smiled faintly.

"It would be difficult for a Vega to get the Governor's ear. Since you are transferring to Reina de Los Angeles, at least we may have the pleasure of your companionship on the journey, may we not? A brave officer like yourself would be the equal of a dozen troopers in an emergency."

CAPITÁN Gonzales sensed the sarcasm, but held his temper in check. He arose and bowed. "I regret that I cannot accompany you," he said. "I have not decided on the moment of my departure. When I go, I shall ride swiftly, with only an orderly. Señor, á Díos!"

"One moment," Don Diego begged. "I have asked for protection, and you have refused it. You can have no objection, then, if I take measures to protect myself and those I escort."

Now, Capitán Carlos Gonzales smiled.

"Protect yourself, by all means," he replied. "That is the right of every man."

"By all means, señor?"

"In any way you please. If highwaymen attack you, slay them. Use blade or pistol, Don Diego. Read poetry to them. Tell them philosophy. Scare them off with big words. Wave your perfumed handkerchief at them, perhaps."

"It is an item of philosophy," Don Diego said, "that one cannot tell from the external appearance of a nut just what sort of a kernel is within. And I use a perfumed handkerchief, señor, because at times I find my nostrils offended with a stench."

"Señor!" Capitán Gonzales cried, angrily.

"I thank you for coming here in answer to my note. I regret your inability to furnish me a proper escort. And I thank you for your kind permission for me to protect myself *by all means*. When you are stationed in Reina de Los Angeles, capitán, call at the Vega casa."

Surprise flashed into the capitán's face at this unexpected invitation.

"I thank you, Don Diego," he said.

"We keep a loaf and a jug of wine always ready for wayfarers. Just ask at the servants' quarters."

"This passes endurance!" the capitán cried. "You presume on your weakness, Don Diego. For me to challenge and fight you for your words–it would be plain murder. I doubt if you know how

to hold a blade."

"As you ride back to the presidio," Don Diego suggested, "remember the item of philosophy about the nut."

CHAPTER Five
At The Presidio

DON Diego bathed in perfumed water and dressed in fine raiment that evening, Bernardo assisting him, and went to the big room where the dinner table was ready. He had some speech with Bernardo before leaving his room, and the native's eyes flashed when the speech was over, and he nodded that he understood.

The little señorita was very lovely, and Señora Vallejo, her duenna, very grim, and Don Felipe looked worried and concerned about the forthcoming journey. But Don Diego might have been at home in his father's house, according to his conduct.

Señorita Carmelita could not complain about his lack of gallantry now, and the blushes played continually over her face. Yet she found herself wishing that this Don Diego seemed more of a strong man at times, and less the fop.

He made light of the journey they were facing, and of its dangers, and Don Felipe judged it was to reassure the ladies. But, when they were finally alone, Don Diego talked the same.

"Do you not understand that we may face peril?" Don Felipe asked. "Do you expect us to travel for four or five days through rough country, packing along a fortune, and not be attacked by rogues? You say an escort is denied you. How, then, are we to be protected?"

"Do not, I pray, concern yourself," Don Diego said. "I feel sure we'll reach Reina de Los Angeles safely, and bring through your gold and jewels safely also."

Don Felipe was shaking his head when Don Diego departed for his own room. The lights were being extinguished around the mission. The monks had sought their humble cots, and only a few natives were wandering about the patio and the buildings.

Don Diego Vega closed his window and dropped the tapestry over it, and stripped off his fine raiment. He dressed simply in dark clothing, extinguished the candle, and for a time stood at the door, his ears attuned to catch sounds outside.

Presently, he slipped out. Keeping in the deep shadows, and moving almost as silently as a shadow himself, he went along the patio wall, around the corner of a storehouse, and was outside.

Two hundred yards away, in a little gully, Bernardo was waiting with a big black horse. Don Diego Vega worked swiftly at a change of garments. He buckled on a sword, put dagger in his girdle and pistol in his sash, and finally put a black mask over his face.

Don Diego Vega was gone for the time being. Señor Zorro was there in the gully with Bernardo and the black horse.

"Wait here, Bernardo, for my return."

He mounted and rode slowly away from the mission, and down the valley toward the town, keeping some distance from the main road but paralleling it. Over the brow of a hill, he approached the presidio.

Lights were gleaming in the barracks room, and he could hear some of the troopers roaring a drunken song. He dismounted in a dark depression a short distance behind the building and went on afoot, cautious and alert. From the shape of the building, he guessed the location of the officers' quarters. Soon he was crouching in the darkness beneath an open window.

Capitán Carlos Gonzales was talking to a certain Sergeant Juan Ruiz, he made out, and their conversation interested him.

"Such is the report, capitán," the sergeant was saying. "The masked man cut a letter Z on the cheek of this rogue of a Valentino Vargas, a fellow it may be well to watch. Hence, some of the caballeros are certain that the masked man was Señor Zorro."

"Zorro!" Gonzales cried. "If the fellow is really in our district, we must be alert. His Excellency would be more pleased at capture of him than at anything else I may name."

"One thing I may say, if the capitán will allow it. There was a time when it was suspicioned that Zorro and this Don Diego Vega were the same. Zorro appears at the inn, and a few hours later Don Diego comes in his carriage–"

THE wild laughter of the capitán stopped him. Gonzales gave vent to a gale of merriment, and finally was able to speak again.

"I have heard of that," he said. "But–I have met and talked with Don Diego Vega. Zorro–he?

It is a jest! That weak, puny caballero who reads poetry and talks of philosophy? The sight of blood would turn him ill. Think you he could do the deeds this Zorro has done? If Don Diego and Zorro are in this neighborhood at the same time, it is a coincidence, and nothing more."

"It is as the capitán says," Sergeant Juan Ruiz replied.

"If Zorro really is here, and we can capture him–! Keep your eyes open, sergeant, and your ears. Watch the natives, and have some of the men who play with the bronze wenches question them. This Zorro befriends natives, and no doubt they are concealing him."

"It is understood, capitán."

"What a country! Zorro–and this mysterious Don Miguel with his infernal scheme for a native uprising! I shall be glad to get me to Reina de Los Angeles."

"When does the capitán depart?" the sergeant asked.

"My relieving officer should be here by dawn. Then, I may leave at any time."

"And your escort, capitán?"

"I am taking you with me, Sergeant Ruiz, and nobody else. You are a good man, and have served me well. In Reina de Los Angeles, there will be better advantages for you."

"I thank the capitán."

"We'll take one good pack horse along. See to it, sergeant. Now, I'll make inspection, and then retire."

Crouching in the darkness outside the window, Señor Zorro heard them leave the room, heard the heavy door slam and their boots ringing on the stone floor as they strode away, and also the sergeant's stentorian bellow calling the men to attention for inspection.

Señor Zorro waited a moment, then vaulted through the open window, and found himself in the capitán's quarters. It was a spacious room, lavishly furnished. Señor Zorro made a hasty inspection of it, then sat on a bench in a corner, and drew his pistol from his sash and held it ready.

He could hear orders being barked in the barracks room, and weapons clashing, and the snappy voice of the officer and the harsh one of Sergeant Juan Ruiz as they made the inspection. Then came the thump of boot heels on the stone flooring of the corridor, and Señor Zorro got to his feet and stood against the wall, ready and waiting.

Capitán Gonzales opened the door and entered, closed the door and dropped the heavy bar into place quickly, without observing that he had a visitor. As he turned from the door, Señor Zorro stepped out from the corner, pistol leveled.

"Make a sound, and you die!" he said. "Put your hands to your shoulders, capitán!"

Capitán Gonzales was startled, but made no outcry. He saw the masked man there in the shadows, and caught sight of the pistol, and put the tips of his fingers on his shoulders, as he had been ordered to do.

"Sit down at your table, and place your palms upon it," Zorro ordered.

THE capitán complied, but his eyes were flashing angrily. He swept those eyes over Señor Zorro as the latter stepped out into the bright light and advanced to the table swiftly and noiselessly, to sit down across it from the capitán, still holding the pistol in a menacing position.

"Who are you, and what do you want here?" Gonzales asked, in a low voice.

"I am Zorro!"

"You have courage to come to the presidio."

"There is little danger, capitán." The voice in which he spoke was not that of Don Diego Vega, but was deeper. "I desired to talk to you."

"About what?"

"Perhaps to make a little deal."

"You wish to surrender and throw yourself on the mercy of His Excellency?" the capitán asked. "I cannot accept such a surrender. Word has been sent to catch Señor Zorro and hang him, and there can be no mercy shown, though you walk in and deliver yourself."

"I have no intention of surrendering," Zorro said. "Nor do I intend being captured. It is not of myself I wish to speak. You are about to transfer to Reina de Los Angeles, I understand. I would put you in the way of promotion."

"In what manner–and why?"

"Have you not heard rumors of the uprising being fomented by Don Miguel? Suppose I tell you, capitán, where and when you and your troopers may capture, at one swoop, all those white renegades who have taken service under this Don Miguel."

Capitán Gonzales betrayed a lively interest. He bent forward, and his eyes glowed.

"You can do that, and will? Why? Ah, I see! Rogues have fallen out. You and this mysterious Don Miguel have quarreled, and you would betray

him."

"I am not in league with him. But I do not care to see white renegades lead natives to the slaughter. I am the friend of the natives, as you know. I would stop this uprising before it can get a good beginning."

"What have you to tell me?" Gonzales asked.

"You know the Canyon of the Cocopahs, near Reina de Los Angeles? Very well! There is to be a meeting of the conspirators in the canyon, the night of the full moon. I know it for a certainty. Is that enough?"

"It is ample, if true," Gonzales said.

"What motive could I have in telling an untruth about it? I have explained my motive for telling you this much. I do not wish to see ignorant natives stirred to revolt, to be slain and punished as a result."

"And what reward do you ask for this information?" Gonzales wished to know.

"It shall be my reward when you capture the white renegades, or frighten and disperse them. And, would you catch some big fish in the net, as well as small fry?"

"How is this?"

SEÑOR Zorro bent forward a little and lowered his voice yet more.

"Don Diego Vega is at the mission here. He is to escort to Reina de Los Angeles this Don Felipe Ramón and his party. No doubt, highwaymen may attack them, unless they are protected."

"I have been obliged to deny them escort."

"Indeed? It may be to your interest, capitán, to see that they reach Reina de Los Angeles safely. They should arrive a couple of nights before the full moon. Don Diego and his family do not have the love of the Governor, I understand. If, when you capture the big fish–But I need not explain everything to a man of your understanding."

"What?" Gonzales cried. "You mean to intimate that–? If this be true, I am a made man. If any of the Vegas are concerned in this affair, and can be caught at it–"

"And if a rich friend newly come from Spain brings gold with which to further the enterprise–" Zorro hinted.

"By the saints! I almost have a friendly feeling toward you, if this is true."

"Why should I tell you false? Where would be the profit? I am not asking that, as a reward, my own misdeeds be forgiven. Take me, capitán, if you can. I am but protecting natives who have not the wit to protect themselves."

"If I furnished an escort, and nothing comes of this, the Governor would demote me."

"Why furnish an escort, capitán? You are riding to Reina de Los Angeles, are you not? Alone?"

"My sergeant will be with me."

"The two of you would be escort enough," Señor Zorro pointed out. "I know your sergeant–a burly fighter. You are not without courage yourself. The party undoubtedly will spend each night at some hacienda. Surely, you and your sergeant can repel any attack by two or three highwaymen in the daytime."

"It is an idea!" Gonzales declared.

"We'll ride with the party. I thank you, Señor Zorro! But I'll capture you the next minute, if I can, and see you hanged, for that is orders."

Señor Zorro arose and bowed but still held the pistol ready. He backed across the room slowly, going toward the open window.

"Do me the favor of standing, capitán, with the tips of your fingers on your shoulders again," he ordered.

The capitán complied once more.

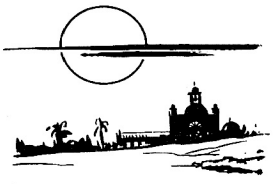
"I have done you a favor," Zorro said, "and even now you are wishing you could get to pistol or blade and try to take me. You are ungrateful, Señor. Ingratitude is a thing often punished, so beware!"

"We'll meet again, Zorro!"

"Undoubtedly–but you may not know me when we do," Señor Zorro replied.

He had reached the window, and now he chuckled a bit behind his mask as the capitán took a step toward him. He got one leg over the window sill, laughed again, and vaulted through.

Behind him, he heard the capitán's roar for the sergeant and troopers. Bending low, Señor Zorro raced along the adobe wall through the shadows, making for the dark depression in which he had left his horse. A pistol exploded behind him, as Gonzales fired through the window, but the ball sped wild. Señor Zorro laughed again, and ran on.



Chapter Six
The Crime That Failed

SHORTLY after dawn, Capitán Carlos Gonzales appeared at the mission, mounted for a journey, and behind him rode Sergeant Juan Ruiz. Because they intended accompanying Don Diego and his party, they had left the pack horse behind, the capitán leaving behind also orders for his property to be forwarded as soon as possible.

He was a most resplendent capitán as he dismounted and strode into the patio, drawing off his riding gauntlets. Don Diego's two carriages were prepared, and his natives ready for the trip. Don Felipe's baggage had been loaded into a cart to make the journey slowly, but a strongbox was in one of the carriages, being closely guarded by Bernardo and another man.

The party came from the guest house, old Brother Marcos leading them. The señorita clung to Señora Vallejo's arm, and Don Diego walked on her other side, chatting and smiling at her, and gesturing with his scented handkerchief.

Capitán Gonzales confronted them.

"Don Diego Vega, I have made a reconsideration," he announced. "Though I cannot furnish you an escort–since the troopers are being held in readiness if the natives start an uprising–yet I will escort you and your party myself, and have a sergeant with me."

"It is, indeed, a change of heart, and I thank you," Don Diego said.

He presented Don Felipe and Don Felipe presented his daughter and her duenna and the capitán bowed gallantly to the señorita and claimed her hand for a kiss. Don Diego used his handkerchief again, but this time to hide a smile.

"We are indeed glad of your assistance, señor," Don Felipe said.

"There are many rogues abroad," Don Diego added. "These hints of a native uprising disturb me. Then, there are highwaymen and bandits. And, so I am told, that notorious Señor Zorro has been seen in the vicinity."

Capitán Gonzales reddened. It is said he has been near," he admitted. "The troopers will have him soon, and make short work of him. There is a rope waiting."

Don Diego, it seemed, had made rather peculiar arrangements for the journey. Don Felipe and his daughter and Señora Vallejo were to ride in the first big carriage. The two riders would direct the four horses, and the two outriders would ride behind. Not content with that, Don Diego sent the two outriders belonging to his own carriage to ride ahead of the cavalcade, in the manner of scouts.

He would ride alone in the second carriage, and follow the first, he said, having with him only the two riders to direct the double team. It was Don Felipe and his valuables that must be protected. Don Diego, he declared, had no fear of being set upon as he rode behind. Moreover, it were the part of a gentleman for him to take the dust, instead of letting the others take it.

Down the valley they went, and to the town. Capitán Gonzales rode close to the first carriage, as Don Diego imagined he would do, trying to catch the señorita's eye, and the sergeant rode a few feet behind him.

They passed through the town and followed El Camino Real up into the hills. The sun grew high and the fog lifted, and it began growing hot. The carriages stopped at intervals, for their occupants to see the view, or to get out and walk a bit and stretch their cramped limbs.

EARLY that morning, word of the departure had been given to some at the inn, and Valentino Vargas had called for his horse, had made ready for the trail and had ridden forth along the dusty highway. A few miles from the town, he met three more men, who were waiting for him.

They galloped far ahead and took position among some rocks beside the trail, and there lay in wait. But, when the carriages approached, Vargas swore mightily.

"Soldiers are with them," he said. "The capitán and a sergeant. Juan Ruiz is the equal of us all in combat, and his superior is no weakling, I have heard. They will be well armed. We cannot attack here."

They left the rocks and rode ahead again, gaining rapidly on the carriages.

"They will stop at the Pulido hacienda for the night," Valentino Vargas judged. "Pedro Pico will be waiting there, according to our plan. Perhaps we can strike during the night, or when the backs of these two soldiers are turned."

So they rode on, toward the Pulido hacienda, a place which extended hospitality to any who asked for it. At times, they stopped on some crest and looked behind, watching the lifting dust clouds which told where the carriages traveled.

It was almost sunset when they came to the hacienda and asked permission to spend the night. Pedro Pico already was there, eating and drinking wine. The news of his infamy had not reached the hacienda, else he would have been denied food and drink.

Valentino Vargas and the three were shown to a long, low adobe building, which was a sort of guest house for inferiors, and made themselves at home. Pedro Pico came to them as they ate.

"The carriages are arriving," he whispered. "A score of native servants are rushing out to care for the guests. One of the outriders galloped forward with news of their coming."

"Let us see that these native servants of Don Diego have ample wine," Vargas suggested. "It will be well if their brains are addled tomorrow, in case we do not commit our fault tonight."

The master of the Pulido estate met his guests and conducted them into the big house, and soon candles were gleaming through all the windows, and the great table was set, with fine linen and crystal glass and gleaming silver, and heaped high with food.

Leaving the others in the guest house, Valentino Vargas and Pedro Pico passed slowly under the palms in the gloom, and neared a window through which they could peer into the big room of the house and watch the scene.

"If we can learn where the strongbox is kept for the night, perhaps we can obtain it," Vargas whispered. "We can have our horses in readiness, and hurry into the hills as soon as we have the gold and jewels. We can be gone before any can saddle and overtake us."

"How about the soldiers?" Pedro Pico asked.

"The capitán will spend the night inside the casa, and the big sergeant possibly will be in the guest house. We must beware the sergeant, for he is no fool. But he will be tired, and eager to get to sleep. As soon as he snores, we will get busy. Counting you, we are five."

HIDING in the shadows, they watched closely. Lights burned suddenly in the window of a room on the second floor, and they saw two of Don Diego's servants enter it, carrying something which they put down against the wall.

"Dios! It is the strong box," Vargas said. "That window will be easy of access. That strong vine which runs up the wall–a man can climb it. What could be better, Pedro Pico? One man can climb the vine and get the box and toss it out–then we'll be away, and divide the loot."

"Why divide it so many ways?" Pedro Pico asked.

"How is this?"

"Why not the two of us do this thing ourselves, and divide the loot in halves? I can get our horses ready and hide them under the trees. You can throw the others off guard, saying you are slipping out to reconnoiter while they watch the sergeant–"

"And I can go up the vine and get the box," Vargas finished for him, "and toss it down to you. And, if you try to make away with it alone–"

"You may trust me, my friend," Pedro Pico said.

"If you played me false, I'd find you, if it took me a lifetime," Vargas hissed. "So be it! The thing is done."

They wandered back to the guest house. The sergeant had gone there, but was outside eating his evening meal, and Vargas called the other three men to him.

"Pedro Pico will go about his business, seeming to have no interest in us," he whispered. "I'll slip out and see what I can learn, and you three remain here and act in a manner natural until the big sergeant is snoring."

He slipped out again with Pedro Pico, and the latter went to get their horses and make them ready for the trail. Valentino Vargas crouched in the shadows and watched the window. The candles were still gleaming in the room. He caught sight of old Don Felipe Ramón once, and then nobody came near the window.

In time, the candles were extinguished. Pedro Pico came slipping to him through the shadows, saying that the horses were tethered a short distance away. Stretched on the ground, they waited until the big house was dark, until travelers weary from a journey should be wrapped in sleep.

"Now!" Valentino Vargas said.

They crept to the wall of the house, and Vargas tested the vine, which bore his weight. With Pedro waiting below, he began the ascent, going slowly and testing the vine repeatedly. He came presently to the open window, and was quiet a moment, listening, clinging to the vine until his arms ached. He could hear low snores.

Through the window he went, and stood panting against the wall. The couch, he made out, was on the opposite side of the room. A streak of

moonlight came through, and revealed a bundle of bedclothing, beneath which was a sleeper, Valentino Vargas thought.

He could not see the box in the moonlight, nor could he find it as he felt along the wall. It would be necessary, he decided, to use stern measures, to make a light, arouse the sleeper, threaten him and get the box, which possibly might be under the couch.

In a corner, Valentino Vargas took a bit of candle from a pocket of his jacket, drew out flint and steel, and struck. Soon, the wick caught, and the tiny flame sprang up. Shielding the flame with a hand, Valentino Vargas started toward the couch.

"Stand!" a voice warned, softly.

Vargas stood as though stricken. The voice had come from behind him.

"Turn slowly, and do not let the candle go out, unless you wish to die!"

Valentino Vargas turned, his heart hammering at his ribs, trying to think how he could make his escape through the window and down the vine. Some man had been left there as guard, he supposed.

The light of the candle penetrated to the corner, and Valentino Vargas's eyes bulged. Standing there with leveled pistol was Señor Zorro.

Chapter Seven
Futile Search

"YOU, señor?" Vargas mouthed, almost dropping the candle in his astonishment.

"Speak in low tones," Señor Zorro advised. "What are you doing here? Why did you climb up the vine and get through the window?"

"As to that, what do you here yourself?" Vargas countered. "Are you, perhaps, a welcome guest in the house of the Pulidos?"

"You came to steal," Zorro accused. "Did you not?"

"And I presume you yourself came just to pass the time of day? It appears, Señor Zorro, that we are on the same errand."

"Perhaps not, my burly friend. I did not come to steal the gold and jewels belonging to Don Felipe Ramón, and I am quite sure you did. I anticipated this visit, Señor, though I did not know what man would make it."

"Is it that I must halve the takings with you?" Vargas asked. If he could decoy this Zorro to the ground, where Pedro Pico could give aid, he might be outwitted, Vargas thought.

"There will be no takings," Zorro told him. "The strongbox of Don Felipe is not to be touched."

"How is this? When did Señor Zorro become so considerate of other people's property?"

"You are slightly in error," Zorro told him. "I am not a thief. I never have stolen. I defend the oppressed and sometimes punish dishonest men and boasters–such as yourself."

Vargas remembered the mark on his left cheek. Despite the menace of the pistol, he hissed a threat.

"I'll kill you for what you did to me, Zorro! When I get the opportunity–"

"As to that, the future will tell us," Zorro interrupted. "Just now, I have something to say to you, and you may pass the word to any others who have eyes on Don Felipe's gold and jewels. They are not to be touched. Don Miguel would not like it."

"Don Miguel? What has he to do with this Don Felipe?"

"You may learn that at the meeting in the Canyon of the Cocopahs. Don Felipe is under the protection of Don Miguel, and all interested will do well to remember it. The gold and jewels are destined for a purpose"

Valentino Vargas had retreated to the window, but Zorro followed him, keeping the distance the same.

"Are you not afraid of being caught?" Vargas asked. "Who is sleeping on the couch?"

"Nobody, señor. 'Tis but a roll of bedding shaped to resemble a human body. I, myself, did the snoring when I saw you climbing the vine. Do you descend the vine now, and be gone."

"We'll meet again, Zorro."

"Undoubtedly," Zorro said. "Remember, señor, I have eyes in the back of my head, and I am as good with a pistol as I am with a blade."

"For the mark you made on my cheek, I intend to kill you!"

"A man's intentions are many, but not always does he carry them out," Zorro observed. "Begone!"

He stepped forward and pressed Valentino Vargas back into the moonlight. Vargas extinguished the candle and got through the window, and made a rapid descent. He met Pedro Pico in

the darkness.

"He is in that room–Zorro," he whispered. "He confronted me. He said Don Felipe Ramón's property must not be touched, that it is an order from Don Miguel."

"What is the meaning of that?"

"I know not. Don Miguel or no Don Miguel, we try to get the gold and jewels," Vargas declared. "It is a swifter way to wealth than participating in an uprising for the sake of loot. As for this Zorro, come with me. I'll inform the sergeant, and he will be captured."

"If we inform, and he is caught, there may be a reward."

"Precisely," Vargas replied. "Also, I shall have the pleasure of seeing the fellow's face, and of watching it turn black when they hang him. Let us make haste."

THEY left the horses where they were, and hurried to the guest house, and Valentino Vargas shook Sergeant Juan Ruiz until he came awake, cursing because his sleep had been broken.

"Señor Sergeant, awake!" Vargas whispered. "Zorro is here! My friend and I watched him climb up a vine and enter the house through a window. He can be taken, if you make haste."

Sergeant Juan Ruiz sprang off the cot and reached for the clothing he had discarded.

"You are sure, fellow?" he demanded, as he struggled into his boots.

"Did not the rogue mark my face at the inn?" Vargas demanded. "Did he not gamble with Pico here, and denounce him for a cheat? We know him, my sergeant. He went up the vine and into an open window–"

"Enough!" The sergeant buckled on his blade and reached for his pistol. He aroused the others in the guest house and bade them dress and arm quickly. He darted to the adobe huts and aroused some of the field servants, and ordered them to surround the house.

Then, Sergeant Juan Ruiz pounded on the big front door of the casa, bellowing for everybody to awake. Valentino Vargas and Pedro Pico kept back in the shadows, ready to escape if anything went wrong, yet eager to be present if Señor Zorro was led from the house a captive.

Inside, lights gleamed, and the big front door was opened. Sergeant Ruiz darted inside, howling for his capitán. He aroused the entire household. Frightened servants, half clad, came tumbling down the stairs and into the big room from their quarters in the rear. The master of the house appeared, and Don Felipe Ramón, and Capitán Gonzales with blade in one hand and pistol in the other.

"Sergeant, what is this uproar?" the capitán demanded.

"Zorro is in the house! He was seen climbing a vine and getting through a window. There can be no mistake. I have the house surrounded, capitán."

Capitán Gonzales had faith in his subordinate, and he knew what capture of Zorro would mean for him personally. He strengthened the cordon around the house, then began a search of the interior. By this time, the ladies of the household were awake, and badly frightened, and Señor Pulido was doing his best to quiet their fears.

More candles were lit, and the search began, a methodical search which started on the lower floor and soon spread to the upper. Not a spot was missed. Pistols held ready, the capitán and the sergeant led the others.

BUT no Zorro was found. So, at last, they came to the room through which he was supposed to have entered the house, and pounded on the door.

"Is this room occupied?" Capitán Gonzales asked.

"Don Diego Vega sleeps there," Señor Pulido replied. "He has with him his mute servant, Bernardo."

The capitán pounded on the door again, and they heard the heavy bar being withdrawn, and the door was opened. The giant native, Bernardo, stood there, a bludgeon in his hand and an expression of ferocity in his face. Behind him, wrapped in a silk dressing gown, yawning and rubbing the sleep from his eyes, was Don Diego Vega.

"Has the native uprising begun?" Don Diego asked, in a voice seemingly half choked with sleep.

"Lights!" Gonzales roared. "Search the room!"

"For what?" Don Diego demanded.

"Señor Zorro was seen climbing the vine and entering your window," Gonzales said.

"Nonsense! Bernardo would have heard him. Moreover, my throat is not cut. And Don Felipe's strongbox, which I undertook to guard, is safe there at the end of the couch. Somebody has been

The bullet missed; the blade did not.

dreaming, capitán."

Gonzales' face grew red. The others were commencing to regard him with reproach. Señor Pulido was muttering something about dumb officers.

"Sergeant Ruiz!" Gonzales thundered. "What mean you by this false alarm? You have aroused everybody. You have made a fool of me!"

"Two men in the guest house told me they had seen the rogue climb the vine and enter the window."

"Find them, and hold them until morning, and I'll deal with them," Gonzales thundered. "My friends, I regret this occurrence. My sergeant has been overzealous. He shall be properly punished, I assure you."

Sergeant Juan Ruiz had not waited to hear that. He had dashed down the wide stairs and out the front door, and was howling for Valentino Vargas and Pedro Pico. But that pair had heard of the futile search, and knew what the outcome would he as far as they were concerned. They did not tarry to face the sergeant's wrath. There was a clatter of hoofbeats, and they were away, galloping up El Camino Real.

The din subsided, and Don Diego Vega closed and barred the door. In the candlelight, he looked at Bernardo, and grinned, and Bernardo grinned in reply, knowing there would be no rebuke to him for doing so.

"It is well they did not search beneath the couch," Don Diego said, softly.

For the costume of Señor Zorro was beneath the couch, and Zorro's weapons and mask also, and now Bernardo swiftly made them all into a bundle, to be carried away at dawn.

And it had been no bedclothing in the shape of a human on the couch when Valentino Vargas had been in the room, but Bernardo himself, and all the time he had held a pistol trained on that same Valentino Vargas, for use in case the unbelievable happened and Señor Zorro had been caught at a disadvantage.

Chapter Eight
A Brawl On The Beach

THEY were away at dawn, traveling as before, Don Felipe's carriage leading and that of Don Diego following a short distance behind.

That evening they stopped at another hacienda, where they were honored guests, and a fiesta was given in their honor, and natives danced and ate and drank and sang their queer songs. Sitting beneath the arches in the patio, the guests watched, and Don Diego saw Señorita Carmelita's face flushed and eyes sparkling.

"You like our land?" he asked.

"I love it already, señor."

"Give not all your love to the country," he whispered, as he bent toward her. "Save some for perhaps another purpose."

She flashed him a quick look, and dimpled and blushed, then turned her head swiftly and pretended to be watching the dancers again. Señora Vallejo pretended to be deaf and blind, for she had been informed by Don Felipe that it would be better so.

"Another day of journeying, and still another, and we shall be at San Juan Capistrano," Don Diego said. "There is a mission! It is an estate, no less. My good friend, Brother Luis, will be there. If ever I wed, I wish him to perform the ceremony."

"You are thinking of marriage?" Carmelita asked.

"I did not think much of it until recently," he replied boldly. "Not until I made this trip to San Diego de Alcála."

He was leaning back in his seat, brushing his nostrils with the scented handkerchief, still very much the fop. He had been reciting poetry to her earlier in the evening.

Carmelita wished that this noble scion of the Vegas were more a man. She knew well that it was hoped she would wed with him. His family was all that could be desired, and they were wealthy in this new land of California. There was no question about that. But Señorita Carmelita had some romantic dreams, and she wished for lover and husband a man of spirit, at whom she could look up with pride.

She sighed, and he bent closer to her still, and she caught the perfume from his silken handkerchief.

"Shall we take a stroll in the moonlight?" Don Diego asked.

"Señora Vallejo gets a pain in her leg when she goes out in the mist or dew."

"Can we not stroll where she can see us from here?"

"Perhaps some other evening, Don Diego."

"You do not like me," he accused.

"How could it be otherwise, señor? You are courtesy itself. And our fathers are lifelong friends."

"You would have me some different, perhaps?"

"Well–perhaps," she admitted. "A girl has dreams."

"I understand, señorita. You would like me better if I rode spirited steeds, and drank and gambled and fought each time I fancied myself insulted. You would have me play a guitar beneath your window–"

"I would have you be a caballero in fact as well as in blood," she interrupted boldly, getting to her feet and motioning to Señora Vallejo. "You will kindly excuse me now, Don Diego? I must have some rest."

HIS eyes were twinkling as he bowed to her and stood aside to let her pass and enter the house. Don Felipe observed it, and sat down beside him when Don Diego resumed his seat.

"It would please me, Don Diego, and I am sure it would please your father also, if you and Carmelita liked each other," Don Felipe said.

"She would have me more a man, I think."

"It surprises me, Don Diego–not that I desire to criticize, understand–that you are not of a more turbulent spirit. Your own father, when he was your age–ah, what a man! What an adventurous spirit! It led him to this new land with his bride."

"Allow me to repeat to you, Don Felipe, an item of philosophy," Don Diego said. "It is an item I love. It is impossible to tell, by the exterior appearance of a nut, what sort of a kernel is inside."

Don Felipe Ramón glanced at him furtively, cleared his throat, and arose.

"I think," said he, "that I shall retire. We have another day of dusty journeying before us."

Don Diego arose and bowed, and his eyes were twinkling again as Don Felipe departed.

The following evening they made another stop at a hacienda, where another fiesta had been

prepared for them, and the little señorita, though polite and courteous, kept slightly aloof. And on the next day they got an early start for San Juan Capistrano, where they intended to make a stop. There had been no attack along the way. Capitán Gonzales and a chastened Sergeant Juan Ruiz had ridden beside the Ramón carriage, and fondly believed it was their presence that kept highwaymen at a distance.

Capitán Gonzales made the most of his opportunities. He sensed that all was not well between Don Diego Vega and the señorita. This Carmelita Ramón appealed to him, and, also, her father had brought wealth from Spain.

Capitán Gonzales, a handsome sort of fellow about whom the women had flocked in San Francisco de Asis and Monterey, believed that he had a way with women. What if he could win the heart and hand of Carmelita Ramón and marry into family and money?

So he paid what court he could and fancied he was making some headway, though it was evident that Señora Vallejo did not fancy him, and Don Felipe was only coldly polite.

Now they were traveling within a short distance of the tumbling sea, and the rushing wind cooled them and blew the dust aside. Over a hill they went, and around a curve in the highway, and saw the mission of San Juan Capistrano before them, with its groups of adobe buildings surrounding it, and crowds of natives going about their work.

Brother Luis welcomed them cordially, but beamed upon Don Diego Vega. The natives, too, crowded around him, not for alms, but as though greeting a benefactor. Don Diego Vega was getting to territory where he was known, not only as himself but also as that Señor Zorro who rode to right wrongs, though this secret was well locked within their breasts.

THEY were ushered into the guest house and given quarters, and a meal was spread for them. The horses were taken away to receive proper care.

Don Diego cleansed himself, Bernardo fetching warm water and perfuming it for him.

"Señor Zorro has been called the Curse of Capistrano," Don Diego said, speaking softly. "This is supposed to be his home. It would not surprise me if he made an appearance here."

Bernardo grinned and bobbed his head.

"At any rate, it would be well that, should he so desire it, he find his horse ready, and his clothing also, in the arroyo behind the huts of the natives any time tonight."

Bernardo bobbed his head again.

"I go now to stroll in the patio, and possibly down to the ocean's shore to take the breeze. You need not attend me."

Don Diego had taken some time with his toilet. When he emerged, he found that others had entertained the idea of a stroll on the beach. Don Felipe Ramón had gone there with his daughter and her duenna, and they were walking back and forth, looking out at the sea.

Capitán Gonzales was in the patio, and approached.

"You are perhaps thinking of a stroll, Don Diego?" he asked.

"Perhaps–alone."

Gonzales' face flamed.

"There are times, Don Diego, when you speak in a tone almost insulting. Perhaps you do not fancy the soldiery. Perhaps you do not favor a reign of law and order."

"The present Governor and his soldiery are not exponents of law and order."

"Is this treason?" Gonzales demanded. "I am one of His Excellency's officers, and cannot endure such talk."

"You are at liberty, Señor, to take your ears where they cannot hear it."

"Those who deal in treason may flourish for a time, but, in the end, they stretch a rope. This mysterious Don Miguel, and this Señor Zorro, for instance–their end soon will come."

"It does not interest me," Don Diego complained.

"If you are thinking of taking a stroll on the beach with the little señorita, spare yourself the trouble. I asked to stroll with the party, and she said she wished to be alone."

"Perhaps you do not have a way with the ladies," Don Diego told him.

"Have I not? More of a way with them, I dare say, than a poet and philosopher. The little señorita is not the sort, I think, to prefer one who is not a man of red blood as well as blue."

"One of blue blood," Don Diego informed him, "does not discuss a lady so frankly."

He left Gonzales fuming and fumbling at the hilt of his sword, and walked on. Down toward the tumbling water he went, where the rollers

were breaking on the rocks. Don Felipe and his daughter and Señora Vallejo were just starting to pass around the huge rocks to continue along the beach.

As he started to follow them around the rocks, he heard the señorita scream.

Don Diego ran forward as swiftly as he could through the heavy sand. He rounded the rocks, and came upon a scene.

VALENTINO Vargas and his friends had been waiting at San Juan Capistrano for the party to arrive. They were hiding in native huts, paying their way handsomely. It was the intention of Valentino Vargas to make a last attempt here to get the gold and jewels of Don Felipe Ramón, regardless of what Zorro had told him of Don Miguel's wish that Don Felipe go unmolested.

Vargas and Pedro Pico were in a hut at that moment, but their three friends were not. They had observed the party walking on the beach, and had crept down through the rocks to intercept them.

Señorita Carmelita wore jewels on her fingers and around her pretty throat, and Don Felipe himself had heavy rings studded with diamonds, and a scarf buckle heavy with precious stones. The three rogues decided to get what they could, and flee to the Canyon of the Cocopahs, for the night of the full moon was only two nights away.

Down from the rocks they had dashed, one holding a pistol and the other two with naked blades in their hands. And when Don Diego rounded the point of the rocks he beheld Don Felipe being forced backward at the point of a blade, and another rogue keeping Señora Vallejo at a distance, while the third had grasped the señorita and was trying to get her jewels.

Though his raiment was that of Don Diego Vega, the spirit became that of Señor Zorro now. His eyes aflame at this indignity, Don Diego whipped out his blade as he ran forward. He gave a cry of rage and made for the nearest man.

The three turned to confront him, and one laughed.

"It is the weakling!" he cried. "Let us muss up his silks and laces."

They set about it, while Señorita Carmelita clung to Señora Vallejo's arm, and Don Felipe lurched forward, though unarmed, expecting to see Don Diego instantly slain by these ruffians.

But Don Diego Vegas appeared fully capable of caring for himself. He disarmed the first man and ran him through the shoulder neatly. The second discharged his pistol, and the ball whistled past Don Diego's car, and the burning powder scorched the lace of his collar.

"Scum!" Don Diego cried.

His blade flashed, and came back red, and the man coughed as he collapsed to the sand, twitched, and was still.

THE third came rushing forward, howling curses, blade up and ready. Don Diego retreated a few paces before his wild rush, stumbled in the sand, and almost went down, but recovered in time to meet the attack.

This third man knew something of fencing, but not enough. In an instant, as soon as Don Diego got the feel of him, he knew he was undone. He retreated step by step, until he was on firm ground at the end of the mass of rocks. And suddenly he darted aside, turned his back, and ran.

"Scum!" Don Diego howled after him.

Don Felipe's cries had attracted the attention of some at the mission, and they came hurrying to ascertain the trouble, Capitán Gonzales among them. They saw a wounded man and a dead one, and one running away, and beheld Don Diego Vega cleaning his blade in the sand.

"Who says he is not a man?" Don Felipe Ramón was thundering. "Three against him, and he did not falter. What manner of country is this, where rogues may attack persons within a stone's throw of the mission? No doubt it has inferior soldiery."

"Pardon, Don Felipe, but I offered to accompany you on your walk," Capitán Gonzales said. "I feared something like this might occur."

"We had no need of the soldiery," Don Felipe told him. "Gentlemen know how to defend their ladies."

Señora Vallejo had dropped upon the sand, and was sitting there moaning and fanning herself. The señorita left her and stepped to Don Diego's side, and timidly touched his arm.

"Forgive me, Señor, for some thoughts I have held concerning you," she begged, her eyes shining as she looked up at him. "They were wrong thoughts."

He smiled down at her.

"It distresses me that you saw me in a moment of uncontrolled passion," he replied. "But there are things which make a man grow turbulent and

cause him to resort to violence. Do you care to take a stroll with me along the beach? I have thought of another poem."

She clung to his arm.

"I'll be delighted to hear it, Don Diego," she said.

Chapter Nine
Rogues At Liberty

SECLUDED in the native hut, Valentino Vargas and Pedro Pico heard the tumult and wondered what had occurred to cause it. They crept forth and joined the throng of natives and workmen hurrying down to the shore.

Before they reached the scene, they heard rumors of what had happened–that three ruffians had set upon Don Felipe and his party, and that Don Diego Vega, of all people, had turned red-blooded for a moment and had driven them off.

Valentino Vargas and Pedro Pico glanced swiftly at each other, guessing it was their three companions who had done this thing.

"Ha! They tried to steal a march on us, and have been punished for it," Vargas whispered. "Now we shall proceed as we have planned, and really cut the loot only two ways. Nevertheless, they were our friends, and were to join the enterprise of Don Miguel. So it is in my mind to punish this Don Diego at the first opportunity. He is on my list, Pedro Pico, along with Señor Zorro."

"You would slay half the men in the land," Pedro Pico said.

They came to the scene, to find one of their friends dead, and another wounded and held in custody, and the third flown. Capitán Gonzales was shouting loudly, taking charge of the situation, and Sergeant Juan Ruiz was rushing about carrying out his superior's orders.

The sergeant turned and caught sight of them, gave a hoarse bellow, and charged through the crowd, and had them by their collars before they could escape.

"Ho, capitán!" he cried. "Here are the rogues who claim they saw Señor Zorro climbing the vine at the Pulido hacienda, and caused us to arouse the household."

Gonzales strode over to them and stood with his fists planted against his hips, glaring at them.

"We did see somebody climbing the vine, and he wore a mask," Vargas declared. "We thought we were doing our duty in telling the sergeant–"

"Who are you?" Gonzales demanded.

"Valentino Vargas, a trader, going now to Reina de Los Angeles. This Zorro fought with me and cut my cheek, and I certainly know the rogue. I saw him climbing the vine. If you did not catch him when you searched, that is no fault of mine."

"And you?" Gonzales asked Pedro Pico.

"I am a gambler, Señor Capitán, and this Zorro claimed that I cheated, and drove me out of San Diego de Alcála. I travel to Reina de Los Angeles also."

"Two rogues, no doubt," Gonzales declared. "Ruiz, you will place them in custody at the mission, until I have opportunity to dispose of the case."

They howled their demands for release, but Sergeant Juan Ruiz prodded them with the tip of his blade, and threatened them with his pistol, and marched them up from the beach and to a small adobe building set aside from the others, with a heavy door and metal bars across the windows.

Sergeant Ruiz opened the door and thrust them inside, not being gentle about it, for the affair at the Pulido hacienda had earned him a stem rebuke from the capitán.

"There, rogues!" he said, and closed the door and dropped the heavy bar into place on the outside. "No doubt the capitán will order you a hundred lashes each, when he gets around to it."

INSIDE the cuartel, Valentino Vargas paced around the little room and howled curses, while Pedro Pico sat on a bench and held his head in his hands. Some natives came to the windows to look in and taunt them, and Vargas cursed at them also. Finally, they tired of their sport, and went to see the dead ruffian buried on the hillside, where there was a burial place for such vermin, and they were left alone.

Came, then, another native, who peered in at them, and then glanced furtively around outside, to make sure nobody else was near.

"You have gold, señores!" he asked. "You would pay a man who told you how to escape your prison?"

"Would pay him generously," Vargas said, stepping to the window.

"Some moons ago, a friend of mine was confined, and I and some others aided him in an escape," the native said. "I can aid you in similar manner?"

"And how is that?"

"First, I must have gold."

"Rogue! I give you gold, and you'll laugh and run away, and tell us nothing," Vargas said.

"I promise, by the saints! Three pieces of gold–"

"One!" Vargas said.

"Three, señor, else you remain as you are, to be taken out and have your back lashed in front of all. Take your choice."

Vargas swore again, brought forth three pieces of gold, and gave them to the native through the bars.

"That bench in the corner, señor," the man at the window whispered. "Shift it, and lift the big flat stone upon which the bench now rests. You will find a tunnel which runs outside the patio wall and opens there in a clump of bushes."

Then the man darted away.

"Not yet!" Vargas warned, as Pedro Pico promptly started to move the bench. "It is the broad light of day, and everybody is rushing around in a state of excitement. Wait until their blood has cooled and they have gone about their business."

"But they may come to get us and whip us."

"Such things are always done in the cool of the evening, when all are at leisure and may watch, as you should know. We have nothing to fear now."

"When we get out, what shall we do?" Pedro Pico asked. "Get our horses and ride for the Canyon of the Cocopahs?"

"There are things to be done here, dolt. I still have my mind on the gold and jewels of Don Felipe Ramón. We know in which room they lodged him, and we saw the strongbox carried there. And there are other things, also. I desire to square accounts with this Don Diego Vega, because of the way he handled our friends, and also with this Señor Zorro, does he put in an appearance here. Not only did he denounce you and mark me, but also he is responsible for the plight in which we now find ourselves."

THEY sweltered in the cuartel during the midday, waiting for the siesta hour. The drowsy mid-afternoon found the mission slumbering. Natives slept in the shade of the walls, and even the friars of the mission had retired for rest.

"Now is the time," Vargas said.

They shifted the bench and lifted the flat stone, and the mouth of a small tunnel yawned before them.

"Go first," Vargas directed Pedro Pico. "I'll put the bench against the wall, and, after I enter the tunnel, will try to drop the flat stone into place. This is a secret which should be well kept, if possible."

Pedro Pico crawled down into the tunnel, sending back a cloud of fine dust. Valentino Vargas waited a moment, then dropped the flat stone into place and followed. It was a small tunnel, and there were places where Vargas feared he could not wriggle through.

He could hear Pedro Pico grunting and panting ahead of him. It was dark, stifling, dusty.

He heard Pico's exclamation of relief, finally, and crawled on and saw the light of day and got a whiff of fresh air. Pedro Pico was at the tunnel's outer mouth, holding back some brush so Valentino Vargas could crawl through.

They found themselves on the bank of a small arroyo, where they were hidden from the mission and the village. Crawling forth, they hurried up the gulch, away from danger.

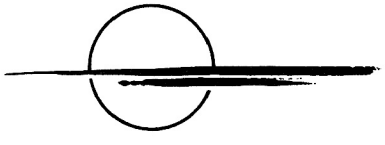
"We'll hide until the nightfall," Vargas said. "Then we'll return, get our horses ready for the trail, hide them, do what we will, and escape. We'll make for the Canyon of the Cocopahs, and there await the meeting Don Miguel has called."

"You would rob Don Felipe Ramón, after being warned by Señor Zorro that Don Miguel would not like it?"

"I have told you my decision before, Pedro Pico. With the gold and jewels of Don Felipe in our possession, we need not concern ourselves with this affair of Don Miguel's. We'll make for the north and live like princes in Monterey."

A mile up the arroyo they went into hiding in a shady spot where the erratic breeze reached them at times, and stretched themselves out to sleep. When they awoke, the scarlet and gold of the sinking sun were streaking the distant sea and the breeze was coming in strongly.

"It will be dusk before we come to the mission," Valentino Vargas said. "Let us go. Perhaps we can find some native who will give us food for gold, and hide us until the time comes to strike."



Chapter Ten
Blades And Pistols

IN THE room assigned him in the guest house, Don Diego Vega made his toilet for the evening meal. Bernardo assisted him, his eyes glowing as he served his master.

"Zorro may ride tonight, and he may not," Don Diego whispered to him. "However, does he desire to do so, he will expect to find his horse and costume in the arroyo."

Bernardo made a guttural sound and nodded that he understood and would obey.

"This is a merry business," Don Diego observed, smiling slightly. "I go me to San Diego de Alcála to escort Don Felipe and the others. I am denied military escort, and highwaymen are prepared to pounce upon us. By a subterfuge, I get the escort, though I like it not. And by whispering that Don Miguel might not like it, were Don Felipe to be robbed, I hold off some of the bandits. Moreover, I arrange for the troopers to catch the white renegades who would upset the natives and lead them to certain slaughter and punishment."

Bernardo bobbed his head furiously, to show that he understood and approved.

Don Diego went then to the big room where the table had been spread, to find the others already there. Capitán Gonzales was endeavoring to pay court to Señorita Carmelita, and she was holding herself aloof with cold courtesy.

But when Don Diego entered the room her face brightened and she flashed him a smile, and Don Felipe, seeing it, and also the answering smile with which Don Diego greeted her, smiled slightly himself, for he was well pleased.

Friar Luis presided at the table, and native servants served. There were fruits, both fresh and preserved, and roast beef and roast mutton, pots of strained honey, olives, dishes of salads, and vegetables. Rich wines were served with the repast, for the mission had rare wines in its cellars, made from grapes grown near the mission of San Gabriel, and for which San Juan Capistrano had traded other wares.

Then, the meal at an end, they strolled in the moonlight in the patio, Don Diego with the little señorita, while Capitán Gonzales fumed, Señora Vallejo always watching, and Don Felipe talking with Friar Luis, who already had received from the grandee a gift of gold for the mission.

"I anticipated this visit, Señor," said Zorro.

"We start in the early morning for Reina de Los Angeles," Don Diego said, when they were all sitting beneath the arches again. "We shall make it by nightfall, for the highway is firm and well traveled."

"I am surprised we have come this far without having our throats cut," Don Felipe declared. "That affair on the beach reveals there are desperate characters in this country."

"Such vermin are encountered now and then," Don Diego said, loftily, "and needs must be disposed of."

"They were disposed of properly. It will please me, Don Diego, to tell your father of your proper conduct in the affair."

Don Diego smiled slightly. The news of his fight would not exactly startle his father, who knew that his son was Señor Zorro at times.

Capitán Gonzales bade the company good night, and retired to his own room, convinced that he could make no headway with the señorita as long as Don Diego Vega was basking in the bright light of hero worship. The ladies left also, and Don Diego sat for a time talking to Friar Luis and Don Felipe, then went to his own room, after giving his servants orders to be prepared for an early start.

BERNARDO was waiting, and Don Diego gestured for him to be gone. He slipped out through the patio, and hurried away to get the black horse in readiness. Don Diego stripped off his gorgeous raiment and dressed in plain clothing again, extinguished the candle, and presently crawled through the open window and made for the arroyo, keeping to the shadows.

Again he donned the habiliments of Señor Zorro, buckled on his blade, and put on his mask.

"Remain here and have the horse in readiness," he instructed Bernardo. "I may have need of him, and may not. Only the future can tell."

Back through the shadows he went to the patio wall, and there crouched for a time, listening. Some natives were singing around the huts, and a few fires were gleaming in the open air, and odors of cooking meat came to him.

He entered the patio cautiously, slipped along in the darkness beneath the arches, and came to the open window of Capitán Gonzales' room. A gentle snoring came from within.

Señor Zorro crept cautiously through the window. He gently dropped the tapestry down over the opening, while the capitán snored on. Through another window the moonlight streamed, but this window was on the outside, and high in the wall, so nobody on the exterior could see into the room.

Zorro drew his pistol from his girdle and stepped to the couch. He stood beside it, in the bright streak of moonlight, and prodded Capitán Gonzales gently in his ribs.

"Awake, soldier!" Zorro said.

Gonzales rolled over, grunting, trying to kick aside the bed covering and sit up. His wits were befuddled with sleep, and he was sitting on the edge of the couch before he realized what was happening. He opened his eyes, and saw the masked Zorro in the moonlight.

"You?" he cried.

"Keep your voice down, capitán, if you care to live. It is necessary for me to speak to you again."

"What now, rogue? I swear that one day I'll catch you and string you up!"

"Catch me first," Zorro suggested.

I wish to remind you of the meeting in the Canyon of the Cocopahs, night after the next. Do not fail to be there with the troopers from Reina de Los Angeles."

"We shall be there and catch the rogues, if they are present," Gonzales declared. "I think this is but a trick."

"There will be several present. You can tell at a glance, capitán, what men would turn renegade and follow this Don Miguel. And another thing, my capitán–a mistake has been made."

"Regarding what?" Gonzales asked.

"I did intimate to you, at San Diego de Alcála, that possibly this Don Diego Vega and Don Felipe Ramón had something to do with the uprising. I spoke of catching big fish as well as small fry–remember?"

"I remember well, rogue."

"New intelligence has come to me. Of a certainty, neither has anything to do with this affair of Don Miguel. Neither is concerned in the planned uprising of the natives. I regret, my capitán, that my former words caused you to furnish military escort to persons to whom you did not wish to give it."

"Is this a trick?" Gonzales demanded. "You have made a fool of me! I have protected this party, with my sergeant, when undoubtedly it would have pleased the Governor to see them robbed, if not murdered. Who are you, fellow, who know so much?"

"I am Zorro!"

"AND who is Zorro, eh? It was whispered once that Don Diego Vega is Zorro, and I laughed at the idea. But, after what Don Diego did on the beach–perhaps the man has us all fooled. I shall look into this matter at once. If Don Diego Vega is Zorro–if you, señor, are Don Diego Vega–I shall ascertain it, and see you properly punished."

"The moonlight," Zorro said, "makes you rave."

Capitán Gonzales started to speak again. But a sudden tumult stopped him. They heard a woman scream. They heard blades clash an instant. They heard the stentorian voice of Don Felipe Ramón howling for aid.

"Something's amiss," Zorro said. "This may be your business, capitán."

He jerked aside the tapestry and sprang through the window. Candles were gleaming in some of the rooms. The natives were coming at a run.

Zorro darted along the wall and got outside the patio, in time to see two men running toward the edge of the arroyo. From a window a pistol barked. Don Felipe Ramón, in his night clothing, crawled through and into the moonlight.

"Robbers! Thieves!" he cried. "There they go! They have my gold and jewels!"

Señor Zorro took after them, running swiftly over the rough dry ground, stumbling and staggering, but gaining on the two ahead, who were carrying the heavy box between them. A pistol

barked as one of the two fired, but the ball went wild.

Señor Zorro fired his own weapon, stopping an instant to do so; they raced on.

His shot had missed. The two ahead dropped over the edge of the arroyo, and Zorro went on after them and dropped over also. Two saddled horses were there, and one man was trying frantically to lash the box behind one of the saddles. The other turned to fight.

He was Valentino Vargas.

"So, rogue!" Zorro cried.

"It is you, eh? The man who marked me! Now, señor, we shall have an accounting!"

Blades flashed in the bright light of the moon. The ground was uneven and rough, and delicate fencing was a perilous thing. Valentino Vargas, therefore, made a desperate attack, depending more on aggressiveness and strength than on fencing science.

"I marked you before, but I shall end you now," Señor Zorro cried. "Then I shall attend to your companion."

They fought desperately, for Zorro knew he had no time to lose. Men were rushing toward the arroyo from the mission. And he was not fighting now as Don Diego Vega, but as Señor Zorro, a so-called highwayman with a price upon his head, and at whom any man had liberty to fire pistol or present blade. Moreover, Capitán Gonzales would be coming, and his stout sergeant, Juan Ruiz, who was a man to be taken into consideration.

THE tip of Valentino Vargas' blade ripped Zorro's sleeve as the latter stumbled over a rock, and Vargas lunged forward to complete his work, thinking he had his adversary at a disadvantage, a cry of delight ringing from his lips. It was his last cry. He found the point of Zorro's blade at his breast, and Zorro promptly ran him through.

Zorro whirled, then, toward the other man, who had continued his work of fastening the strongbox behind his saddle. Now he was getting into the saddle. Men were arriving on the rim of the arroyo, starting to work their way down to the bottom. Zorro could hear Capitán Gonzales barking orders, could hear the strong voice of Sergeant Juan Ruiz answering him.

Pedro Pico kicked his mount in the flanks and started. But Señor Zorro was at his side instantly, reached up and grasped him, jerked him from the saddle and hurled him to the ground. Pedro Pico struck at him with a dagger, and Zorro had his sleeve ripped again.

"Scum!" he cried, and struck with his own dagger, using his left hand. Pedro Pico gave a cry and fell back. The wound was not mortal, but it put the man out of the fighting.

"It is Zorro!" Pedro Pico cried. "He escapes with the gold and jewels! I tried to stop him–he has stabbed me–"

Pistols barked. Sergeant Ruiz had reached the bottom of the arroyo, and came charging like a mad bull, blade out and ready.

"Hold, fellow!" he cried.

Zorro did not have time to get into the saddle, which was his purpose. He whirled, and his blade clashed with that of the sergeant. There was no time for proper fencing now. The others were rushing forward, and Señor Zorro found himself in danger of capture.

It flashed through his mind what capture would mean–the triumph of the Governor, death by the rope, shame and disgrace for the Vegas. The thought made him a madman. He attacked fiercely, knocked the sergeant's blade aside, ran him through the shoulder and saw him fall back, dropping his sword.

Into the saddle of Pedro Pico's horse, Zorro vaulted. He bent low and urged the animal down the arroyo through the heavy sand. More pistols barked behind him, but he rode unscathed through the semi-darkness. Around a bend, and he was safe for the moment.

Bernardo was waiting there with the black horse, and Zorro quickly sprang from the steed he rode, and mounted his own.

"Leave this horse here. Get out and away," he ordered Bernardo. "You must not be found here. I'll leave the black horse at the upper end of the arroyo, behind the storehouse."

He compelled his mount to ascend the slope, and for a moment revealed himself in the moonlight at the top, so that those behind saw him. He sent a wild laugh ringing down the wind, then rode madly.

First, he made for the highway, and clattered along it with as much noise as possible. But soon he turned aside, riding with extreme caution, and cut back around the mission, hearing other riders going past in futile pursuit. He left the black where he had told Bernardo, for the servant had

not yet arrived at the spot. He stripped off the habiliments of Señor Zorro, and hurried through the shadows back toward the mission.

CLOSE behind the storehouse he crept. The patio was alive with men. The voice of Capitán Gonzales came to him:

"Where is Don Diego Vega, then? Out riding, as this Señor Zorro! It has been suspected for some time."

"You are mad," Don Felipe Ramón replied.

"We shall see as to that. Every other man had returned to the patio. Where is Don Diego Vega?"

"Perhaps the robbers hurt him when he pursued them," Don Felipe defended. "He may be out there somewhere now, wounded. We must search for him."

"We do not know he pursued the robbers. He shall have some questions to answer when next we meet. He is under suspicion. I shall make it my business to investigate well."

"This Zorro slew one thief and wounded another," Don Felipe pointed out. "He left the horse, with my strongbox on him, down the arroyo and went away on his own. I cannot find it in my heart to blame the man much. I understand he has done naught but befriend the helpless– though that did not always please the Governor."

"Being a friend of the Vegas, it is expected you would talk treason," Capitán Gonzales said, angrily. "Perhaps it would not be amiss if I investigated you, also, señor."

Don Felipe Ramón sputtered his rage at the insult, and turned away.

"But this Don Diego Vega comes first," Gonzales roared. "He has questions to answer. Where is he?"

"I am here, Señor Capitán," said the voice of Don Diego close behind him.

Chapter Eleven
In The Canyon

GONZALES whirled to face him. Don Diego Vega stood there, only partially clad, brushing his scented handkerchief across his nostrils. He looked at Gonzales, and yawned.

"What is all this tumult?" Don Diego asked.

"He accuses you of being Señor Zorro," Don Felipe replied.

"Indeed?" Don Diego said. "I am flattered, Capitán Gonzales. This Zorro seems to be quite a man."

"Where have you been?" Gonzales demanded. "Give an accounting of where you have spent your time!"

Don Diego Vega lifted his head, and his eyes flashed. "I do not relish the tone of your voice," he said. "There is something of disrespect in it."

"As an officer of His Excellency, I demand that you make reply," Gonzales said.

"I was awakened by the tumult, Señor. I rushed around as did everybody else, trying to discover the reason for all the turmoil. Then I returned to my room."

"You were not there when I searched for you."

"Possibly not. You may have searched before my return. It appears to me, Capitán Gonzales, that you and your sergeant are not proper soldiers. During the day I was compelled to fight off rogues who attacked Don Felipe and his daughter, and during the night Señor Zorro had to fight off thieves. Everybody does the fighting, it seems, except the soldiery."

"Beware, señor, lest you try my temper too far!' Gonzales cried.

"Do not bluster so much," Don Diego begged. "Surely, there has been enough tumult for one night. And we must start on early in the morning. Are we to have the pleasure of your escort again, capitán?"

"Beware!" Gonzales roared again. I am not a novice with a blade."

"Are you, by any chance, challenging me to a duel by the light of the moon?" Don Diego asked. He beckoned to one of his native servants standing near. "Go to my room, and bring me my sword," he directed.

But Don Felipe Ramón hurried forward to prevent this.

"You forget yourselves, señores," he said. "Both of you have better things to do than fight each other. Drop this for the present, I beg of you. The accusation of Capitán Gonzales is absurd unless he has better facts upon which to base it, and it is beneath the dignity of Don Diego Vega to notice it when it is made."

Friar Luis came forward, speaking in his gentle voice, and urged them to remember that they were at the mission, and that there had been enough violence and blood-letting for one day, so they turned away, each to go to his own room.

At dawn, the carriages were made ready and loaded, and they began the last part of the journey to Reina de Los Angeles. The highway was firm, and there were few hills, and the horses kept up a good pace.

At midday, they stopped at a rancho where Don Diego was known, to eat and rest for a time, sitting in the cool patio where a fountain splashed and scarlet blossoms ran riot over the adobe walls.

" 'Tis but a few miles more," Don Diego said to the señorita and her father. "There are some splendid houses in Reina de Los Angeles, and people of the best. But my father's hacienda–there is the place! Only a few miles from the town, a place of calm retreat. I spend many days at a time there."

SEÑORITA Carmelita seemed to be dreaming. There was a faraway look in her eyes and she was smiling faintly. Don Diego glanced at her, and her father saw the glance, and dreamed also that his wishes would be fulfilled, and his family be linked with that of Vega through marriage.

When the siesta hour was over, they went on. Capitán Gonzales rode beside the first carriage again, and held speech with Señorita Carmelita whenever the horses slowed, but knew he was making scant headway.

This irked him, and built in his breast rancor against Don Diego Vega greater than had been there before. He was thinking, however, of what Señor Zorro had told him regarding the meeting in the Canyon of the Cocopahs. If he had not been misled, soon the air would ring with his plaudits, and he would be the hero of the hour for preventing an uprising of natives, and then, perhaps, Señorita Carmelita would give ear to him.

Through the late afternoon they traveled briskly, until the dying sun stained the tumbling waves of the sea again. They came to a range of small, rounded hills, and followed the highway over them, and at dusk topped the last, and saw the pueblo of Reina de Los Angeles below them, lights already commencing to gleam in the houses and torches in the huts.

Down the slope they rushed with the carriage horses at a gallop, to come to the corner of the plaza, where the Vega casa stood. One of the outriders had gone ahead, and they were expected.

The door flew open, and gray-haired Alejandro Vega, Don Diego's august father, stood there with his arms outstretched in welcome. With two natives carrying torches on either side of him, he advanced to the first carriage, out of which Don Felipe got quickly to embrace him.

"My old friend! My old friend!" Don Felipe said, his eyes growing misty.

Welcome to my poor home!" Don Alejandro replied. "Did my son conduct you in care and safety?"

"He got us through, and my property also, though there were divers and sundry tumults," Don Felipe said. "He conducted himself in those as a caballero should."

Capitán Gonzales paid his respects and galloped across the plaza and toward the soldiers' barracks, with Sergeant Juan Ruiz close behind him. The capitán at once went into conference with the present commandante, whose office he was to take, and spoke of what Señor Zorro had told him.

"We'll catch the rogues!" Gonzales thundered. "We'll take every man, save a couple left to guard."

"It is a small box canyon, and we have to bottle up the mouth, and we have them," the commandante replied. "Tomorrow night is the night of the full moon–that is the time. I, too, have heard some rumblings concerning this Don Miguel. His identity is a question."

"Perhaps, when we take him, we shall be astonished," Gonzales said.

BUT, in the great casa of the Vegas, there was no talk of war and violence. The Ramóns were made at home, and Don Diego went to his own quarters on the upper floor, and dressed in his very best. And when he descended the wide, winding staircase to the great living room, where the table was spread, there was an odor of perfume about him, and he held a book of poetry, and to look at him one would think he did not know

how to handle a blade.

On the morrow he played host, for the blooded ladies of the town came to pay their respects to the Señorita Carmelita Ramón, and many of the young caballeros also. Then came the siesta hour, and they rested, and in the evening was a feast of welcome.

There were many guests, so that a man became lost among them, which was as Don Diego desired it. They filled the house and strolled in the patio, and it was difficult for one person to find another.

Don Diego slipped up the stairs to his own room, where Bernardo was waiting.

"The horse is ready?" he asked. Bernardo nodded assent.

"Get to him at once, and I'll follow. Then do you await my return. Have any of the troopers left the barracks?"

Bernardo, who had been watching, nodded assent again, and opened and closed his hands twice.

"Twenty?" Don Diego asked; and once again Bernardo nodded.

"Fair odds!" Don Diego said, chuckling as he stripped off his rich garments, and left them so he could don them quickly again.

He got into his plain clothing, slipped along the hall, went to an open window, and descended to the ground by means of a clinging vine. Through the shadows he went swiftly, like a shadow himself, until he was behind the natives' huts. Bernardo was waiting there with the horse behind some rocks.

Working swiftly, he put on the costume of Zorro again, and the mask, and his weapons. Then he gave Bernardo a pat on his shoulder, and mounted the big black. He rode away through the night, going slowly so there were no resounding hoofbeats.

He did not follow one of the trails, but cut across the open country, traveling with caution, careful not to get against the skyline where he might be observed against the moon. The Canyon of the Cocopahs was but five miles from the town, but by the route Don Diego followed it was seven.

For he did not go directly to the canyon's mouth, judging that the troopers would be on guard and watching there. He judged, also, that Capitán Gonzales would allow any who wished to enter, but bottle up the canyon so they could not escape.

Señor Zorro, however, knew another route into the canyon, down one side through the tangle of brush which covered the jutting rocks. He made for the canyon's rim, going slowly over the rough ground.

Down the slippery slope he urged the horse, pausing every few feet to watch and listen and let the animal have a breathing spell. Half way down, he came to a tiny clearing, and there he stopped again, and looked below.

Two tiny fires were gleaming, and men were around them, and horses were tethered to trees a short distance from the fires. Down the canyon rode two more men, to dismount at the nearest fire and tie their mounts and speak to the others.

Señor Zorro rode on down the slope, slowly and cautiously. Reaching the bottom, he stopped behind some high brush, where he could not be seen.

He was wondering how soon the troopers would advance from the mouth of the canyon. Capitán Gonzales would be eager to be at the kill, he supposed. He listened intently, and on the slight breeze which came in from the canyon's mouth he heard the snort of a horse and the rattling of accouterments.

They were coming, then. They would easily catch these white renegades who were ready to follow Don Miguel in an uprising. It would mean fire and theft for a time, much loot for the white men. Then the soldiers and local natives would get organized, and the malcontents be hunted down like wild beasts, and slain or punished.

Señor Zorro waited a moment longer. Down the canyon, he caught sight of a blade reflecting the light of the moon. He rode out into the open, between the fires and the advancing soldiery.

"Ho, Señores!" he cried.

Chapter Twelve
Fight And Flight

THOSE at the fires whirled to look toward him. They could see him plainly in the bright moonlight, sitting his black horse, the mask concealing his features, his naked blade held high over his head.

"It is Señor Zorro!" some native cried.

"Where is Don Miguel?" Zorro shouted at them.

"None of us know, señor," one cried back at him. "We were told to meet him here tonight. Perhaps he will come later. Are you one of us?"

Zorro had been watching toward the mouth of the canyon, and from where he sat his horse he could tell that Capitán Gonzales had spread his troopers in a thin line across the canyon's floor, and that now he had stopped them, wanting to listen to what was said.

"No, I am not one of you!" Zorro cried in answer to the question.

"What do you here, then? Why do you ask for Don Miguel?"

Señor Zorro's wild laugh rang among the rocks.

"Fools!" he cried. "There is no Don Miguel! He is but a figure of my imagination. Some time ago I started these rumors of an uprising, and contacted cleverly a few men, who passed the news on to other rogues. The thing grew and grew, without aid from me."

"How is this?" somebody shouted.

"All of you who answered the call–it shows what you would do, were there really a Don Miguel. Renegades! Ready to lead the stupid natives in a revolt, to certain slaughter, for the sake of what loot you may gain! Every man of you stands guilty of treason and conspiracy–and you are without a leader!"

They were grumbling now, and some of them started toward their horses.

"You are entrapped!" Zorro shouted at them. "Even now the troopers from Reina de Los Angeles are creeping upon you from the canyon's mouth. You will stretch rope–"

They howled at that, panic claiming them, and rushed for their mounts, jerking the reins free, springing into their saddles. The horses, frightened at the tumult, plunged and kicked and disconcerted them.

Down the canyon, Capitán Gonzales barked a command. The troopers swept forward, jumping their horses over brush and rocks and making toward the fires.

Zorro swung his horse aside. Pistols began barking over behind the fires, and the soldiers answered the fire. But this was close business, where there was scant time in which to reload, so it was a time for steel rather than pistol ball.

Some of the renegades rode madly straight at the soldiers, in an effort to break through the line and get away, and they clashed in the moonlight. Others tried to get up the slopes of the canyon, and turned back because their horses could not make it.

Back in the shadows, Zorro moved his horse forward a short distance, then waited to watch.

"At them!" Capitán Gonzales was shouting above the din. "Capture or kill every one! Catch me this Señor Zorro, too!"

It was time, Zorro judged, to get away from the scene. He had finished his work. He had decoyed the rogues to the canyon, and the soldiers could do the rest. He turned his horse and started up the winding slippery trail to the top.

BUT he came to a quick stop. No doubt he had been seen riding along the canyon's rim, and followed by some trooper. For now a rider was coming down from the top, following the narrow, slippery trail.

Zorro knew he would be at a disadvantage if he fought there. The other would be above him, and there was not room for two horses to pass. And the fighting would be heard from below, and some would ride up and take him.

He turned his horse and retreated to the floor of the canyon. There was desperate fighting in the clearing now. Two of the renegades broke through, and the troopers gave immediate pursuit. Others were making a stand, though they knew it was futile, preferring to die on a soldier's blade than be captured and strung up by the neck.

Zorro waited in the shadows a moment, watching the scene, waiting for an opportunity to ride through the line. But that line was broken now, as the troopers fought the renegades.

Suddenly, he bent low over his horse's neck, drove home the big spurs he wore, and dashed out from his place of concealment. He was seen instantly, and a cry arose. Between him and the mouth of the canyon were several mounted troop-

ers, and some on the ground, and Capitán Gonzales was there, also.

Zorro got past the first few without taking a sword cut or giving one, merely by superb horsemanship. But he found his way barred by Capitán Gonzales, arrogant in this moment of victory.

"This man is mine!" Gonzales howled. "Attend to the others."

As he spoke, his horse swerved and crashed against that of Zorro. They circled, and their blades clashed.

"I'll wound you, see your face," Gonzales shouted, as they fought. "I think I know the countenance behind that mask."

"Beware your own face!" Zorro cried. "Best call some of your men to help."

"I need no aid!"

He said it bravely enough, but, even as he said it, Capitán Gonzales was worrying a bit. He had heard tales of Zorro's swordsmanship, and now he had the feel of Zorro's blade, and knew the tales were true. The perspiration popped out on his forehead as the horses circled in the moonlight, and they continued fighting.

From the corner of his eye, Señor Zorro saw one of the dismounted troopers drawing near, holding a sword ready. His left hand brought his pistol from his girdle, and as his horse wheeled, he fired. The trooper gave a screech and fell.

"I am fighting an army," Zorro said.

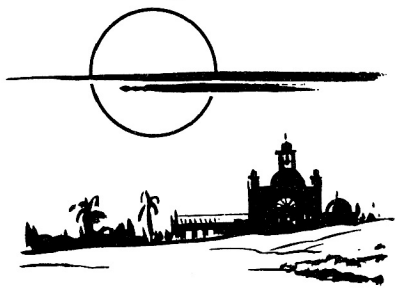
"Stand back! This man is mine!" Capitán Gonzales howled.

He started to press the fighting, while some watched the mounted combat from the distance, and others were too busy fighting themselves to care what happened to their capitán. Zorro's big black was forced backward a distance, and they turned, and Zorro forced the fighting in turn.

"I did not like your manner when last we met," he said. "I cannot change that, but I can make of you a thing the ladies will despise."

"Fight, rogue!" Gonzales howled.

"I have no wish to kill you, capitán. To disgrace you will be enough."



HE PRESSED the fighting again, and suddenly the capitán's blade flew from his hand to strike the ground a short distance away. The capitán, mad with rage, dropped a hand to get his pistol. Zorro had discharged his, and it was empty.

"You would fight unfairly?" Zorro cried at him. "This must be your punishment, then."

His blade darted forward. Capitán Gonzales felt scorching fire on his cheek. A cry of rage escaped him, for he knew what had been done to him. He would bear that jagged letter Z, the mark of Zorro, to the grave with him.

Then Zorro was bending from the saddle, clasping him and tearing the pistol away, to hurl it to the ground. He tossed Capitán Gonzales out of his saddle and to the ground also, gave a wild laugh, wheeled his horse, bent low, and raced down the canyon.

"After him! Shoot him down! Do not let him escape!" Capitán Gonzales was screeching, as he struggled to get back into the saddle again.

Madly, Zorro rode, the big black horse hurdling rocks and clumps of brush. Behind him, pistols barked, and bullets flew near him, but none struck home. He approached another and larger clearing, and saw trouble ahead.

Not all the force of troopers had been led deeply into the canyon by the capitán. Here were a few kept in reserve, to capture any trying to flee.

Señor Zorro saw four men before him, all mounted, and now they began riding forward, converging upon him. His pistol was empty, he had only his blade. He rode straight toward them, but pulled rein slightly and slackened speed.

"One side, señores!" he called.

But they came on at him, and behind him Capitán Gonzales and some of the others broke from the brush in pursuit. Señor Zorro was between two fires.

He dug in with his spurs again, and swerved to the left, and the troopers in front swerved in that direction also.

With a quick pressure of knees and touch of the rein, Zorro swung his horse abruptly back to the right.

He bent low and dashed at them, past them, a pistol exploding almost in his face as he rode. A blade flicked out at him and ripped the collar of his blouse. His horse staggered as another bumped against him, but kept his feet and raced on.

More pistols exploded behind him. One bullet whistled past his ear. There was a drum-fire of hoofbeats as the pursuit began. Capitán Gonzales was howling commands:

"Drop everything else and catch this rogue! He is worth all the others!"

Rage gave the capitán strength in that pursuit. He knew that his handsome face had been marked forever, that the fair ladies would turn from him in scorn, not that he bore a scar as a result of sword fighting, but because that scar was a mark this Señor Zorro gave to men he did not deem worthy of slaying.

Capitán Gonzales howled his orders, and the pursuit settled into a race, with Zorro's wild black horse leading and gaining slowly. But there were good horses in the troop, too, that of Capitán Gonzales especially, and the pursuit hung on.

Zorro was racing across rough land to get to the highway, where the going would be better. His horse was laboring in the soft ground.

And suddenly he stumbled and fell, and Señor Zorro went over his head to land in the dirt.

Chapter Thirteen
Swift Pursuit

HE SPRANG up instantly. His horse was struggling to his feet, and Zorro called softly to him, and hurried toward him. The frightened animal drew back at first, and Zorro lost precious time coaxing him near enough so the reins could be grasped. He got up into the saddle again.

The pursuit had gained during all this, and was too close for comfort now. Another pistol was fired, and the ball came so near that Zorro caught himself flinching. He judged that would be all of the shooting. Those behind could not reload while they rode so madly after him.

He bent low over his mount's neck again, and raked with the spurs, and the big black responded with a wild burst of speed. Señor Zorro had in mind what he had to do, and now it seemed difficult of accomplishment, unless he could gain on them more.

He reached the highway and turned down it, and gained swiftly for a time, until those behind reached it also and could make better speed. He was riding toward Reina de Los Angeles, particularly the spot where Bernardo would be waiting.

As he neared it, he began shouting phrases which none but Bernardo would understand. Madly he raced around a curve, glancing back just before doing so and estimating the distance between him and his foe.

As he neared a jumble of rocks, somebody sprang out into the highway and waved his arms. Bernardo had heard him, and had obeyed.

Señor Zorro skidded the horse to a stop and sprang from the saddle.

"Mount! Ride on, furiously! Make your escape!" he ordered the native.

Bernardo sprang into the saddle, grasped the reins and kicked with his bare heels. The big black plunged onward. Zorro dropped behind the rocks.

Around the curve swept the pursuit, led by Capitán Gonzales. They raced past Señor Zorro's hiding place and continued after the black Bernardo was riding. Zorro darted across the highway and traveled swiftly through the shadows.

He came, in time, to the cluster of huts behind his father's casa, and went through the darkness along a wall and to the vine by which he had descended from the house. Grasping it, he began the ascent.

Half exhausted, panting, perspiring freely, he got to the window and pulled himself through. There had been no time for him to change from the habiliments of Zorro, and the mask was still concealing his face.

He reeled back against the wall, steadied himself, and began hurrying to his own quarters. From below came strains of music, ringing voices, feminine laughter. Possibly he had not been missed.

TEARING the mask from his face, he hurried along the corridor and let himself into his own room. A basin of water was waiting, and soft towels. He stripped off the clothing he wore, and hid it in a closet, deep beneath a heap of other things, and the weapons of Zorro with it.

Washing face and hands in the perfumed water, he dried them quickly, and swiftly dressed as he had been when the reception had started. His breathing had returned to normal now. He grasped a silk handkerchief, slipped quietly out of the room, went along the mezzanine, and descended the stairs.

Don Alejandro met him at the bottom.

"Where have you absented yourself, my son?" he rebuked. "Some have been looking for you."

Their eyes met, and Don Diego smiled faintly.

"I have been about. Perhaps they did not look in the right place," he said.

"They are dancing again in the patio. Perhaps you will find the Señorita Carmelita disengaged."

Don Diego Vega smiled again, and went out into the patio, where the Señorita Carmelita was waiting.

"I wait to see you dance El Sombrero," she told him.

"You'll honor me by dancing it with me?" he asked.

"If you like."

The music changed, and they danced. When it was over, and they had bowed in acknowledgment of the applause, Don Diego led her along the side of the patio toward a bench packed with cushions.

"For quite a time, I did not see you," the señorita said.

"It pleases me that you looked, and that I was missed."

"And then, quite suddenly, I saw you again," she went on, her voice lower and softer. "But you were not dressed as you are now, and you were taking a black mask from your face. But do not be disturbed, Don Diego. I am quite sure that I understand. The things Señor Zorro has done I approve of them. But he should not always court so much danger."

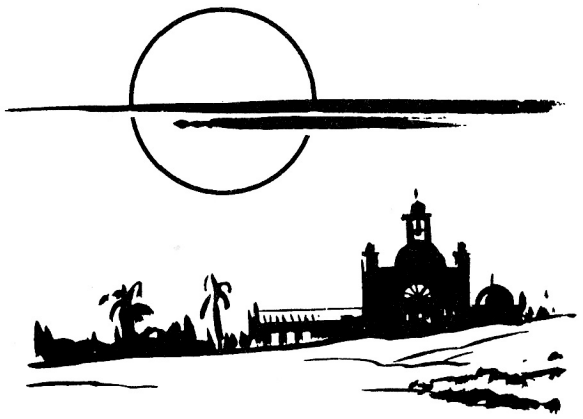
"Perhaps he would court it less, did he have heavy responsibilities, such as, say, the head of a family," Don Diego said, boldly.

There was a sudden tumult at the front of the casa, natives shouting in fright, men calling to one another, horses stomping. There came a thundering demand for entrance at the door. The guests, startled, ceased their merrymaking. Servants rushed to the big front door, but waited for the command of Don Alejandro to open it.

Don Alejandro took up a commanding position in front of it, gestured, and two natives pulled the massive door open slowly. Capitán Gonzales stood there, gripping Bernardo by the arm, and behind him was Sergeant Juan Ruiz and some of the troopers.

"What means this intrusion, Señor Capitán?" Don Alejandro demanded. "I am giving a reception here this evening, and you have startled my guests. You are the new officer in Reina de Los Angeles, are you not?"

"Is this fellow a servant of yours?" Gonzales



demanded.

"He is body servant to my son, Don Diego."

"Ah, ha! So he is! Señor Zorro was abroad tonight, señor. We were chasing him. He was riding a big black horse. At a certain spot during the chase, he was obscured a moment. We continued chasing the horse, and caught him, and riding him was this man."

DON DIEGO drifted forward, brushing his nostrils significantly with his scented handkerchief.

"Pardon me, capitán," he said. "That horse, if it is the big black, is a spirited animal. I often have Bernardo exercise him in the cool of the evening, out on the highway."

"And where have you been all this night?"

Don Diego drew himself up stiffly. "Am I accountable to such as you for my comings and goings, señor?" he barked. "You affronted me at San Juan Capistrano, saying you had suspicion that I might be this Señor Zorro. Do not so affront me now, or I'll forget my station and do you the honor of matching blades with you. But it appears you have matched blades with somebody already. There are a series of cuts on your face, my capitán. Been playing in the briers, mayhap?"

"This fellow of yours would not answer questions I put to him."

Don Diego smiled. "For good reason. He is a dumb mute, and all in the town know it. He could not answer did he desire to do so."

"A convenient sort of servant to have sometimes," Gonzales hinted.

"I find him so. Pardon me, Capitán Gonzales, but it would please my father, I am sure, if you would take your uniformed ruffians elsewhere. I am quite sure that they, and you, have no business here."

Gonzales' eyes flashed. "Sooner or later, Don Diego Vega, we cross blades," he said. "I have a feeling that it is to be–or has been."

"If it has been," Don Diego observed, "you will not want to cross blades with me again. A cut on the face is bad enough, my capitán, however you received it. But a cut in the heart–ah, that is the finishing touch! Good night, capitán!"

"Good night!" Gonzales growled the words, and motioned for Ruiz and the men to retire. At the door, the capitán turned. "I grant you that this Señor Zorro is clever. But if he rides on, he will ride into trouble, and a rope."

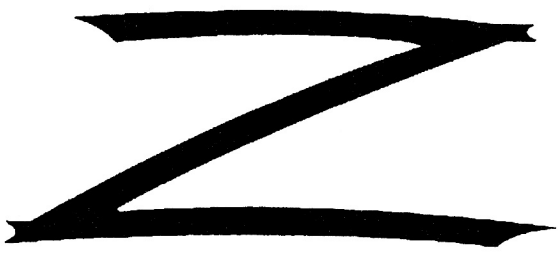
"If I ever see him," Don Diego observed, "I'll tell him as much. No doubt you are correct. But from all accounts, he is a stubborn fellow–and something whispers to me that he will ride on, as long as there is need!"

Then Don Diego turned his back, and the big front door was closed, and Don Alejandro motioned for the musicians to resume their playing. Don Diego took the hand of Señorita Carmelita and tucked it inside his arm, and led her across the big room.

"There is a pleasant nook in the corner," he observed. "Señora Vallejo may watch us–from a distance. There has been so much turmoil tonight. Let us rest for a time in this cozy nook. I have just bethought me of another poem."

She looked up at him from a radiant face. "I shall be glad to hear it, Don Diego," she said.

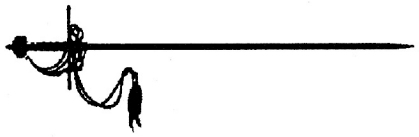
"This poem is of my own poor manufacture, señorita. It has to do with a mysterious Don Miguel, who never existed, yet had his uses, nevertheless."



ZORRO

Draws His Blade

Swiftly out of the night
Rode the masked and cloaked Zorro,
With flashing sword,
ready to right a great wrong !



GAUNT and gray, with his head held high and indignation flaming in his eyes, Fray Felipe stood before the door of the chapel at Mission San Gabriel that afternoon, alone between a frenzied mob and the terrified cringing man they sought to slay.

The strong wind whipped the fray's tattered robe around his emaciated form as his thin arms were uplifted in a gesture that demanded silence. In front of him was the seething mob–peons, natives, travelers off the highway, traders, vagabonds of the hills–all acting like maniacs as the blood lust turned them from men to beasts.

"Back!" Fray Felipe shouted in his shrill voice. "Are you mad, my sons? Would you desecrate the chapel? The man has claimed sanctuary until dawn tomorrow, and shall have it. Such is his right."

A chorus of wild cries answered him:

"Give us the murderer!...Give us the rogue who slew Don Esteban Sanchez!...Let us hang him!"

Fray Felipe silenced them again with a gesture. "The man has sanctuary until dawn tomorrow. That is the law. I shall talk to him meantime and learn the truth."

"We know the truth already, fray," a man called.

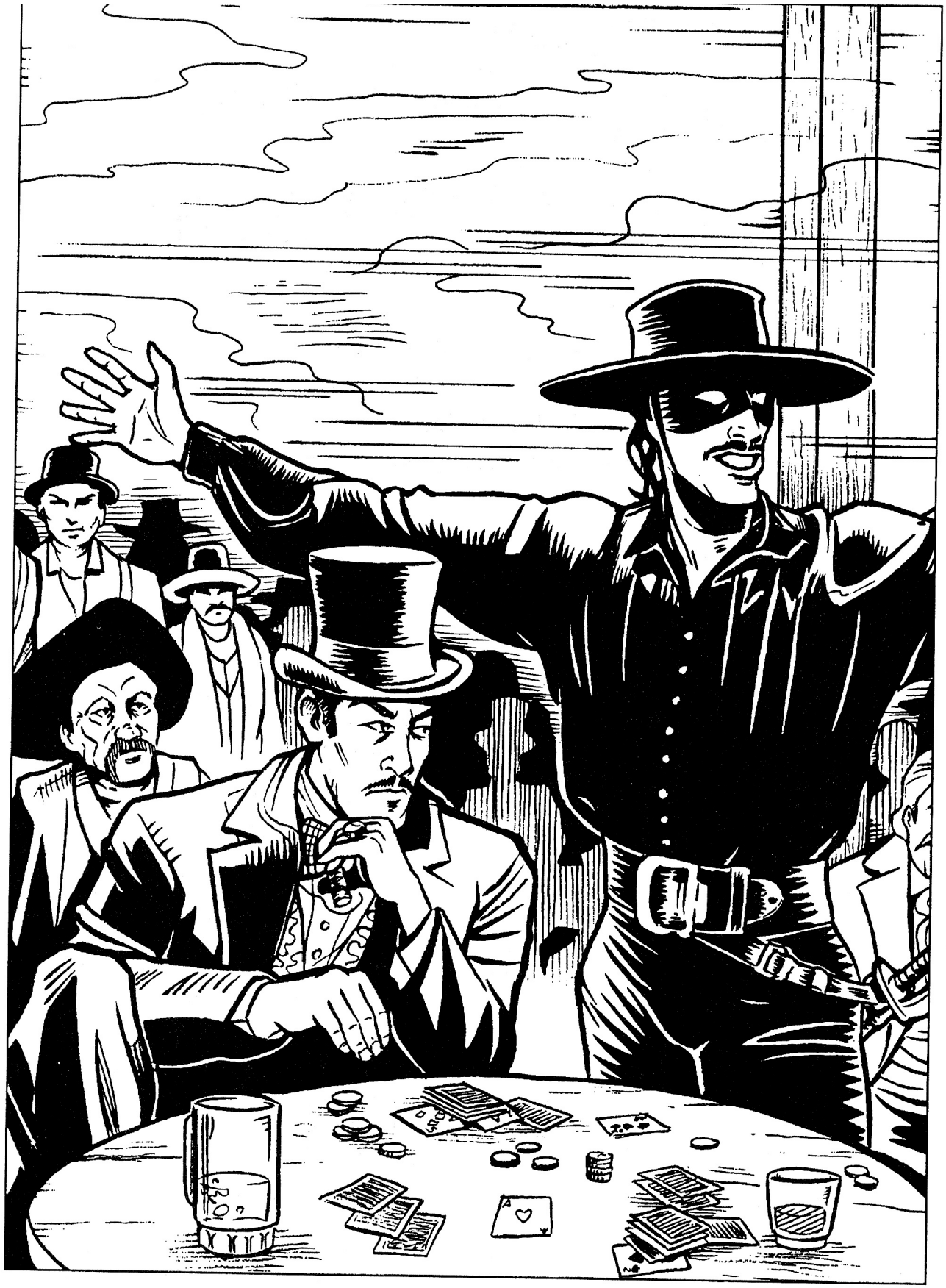
Fray Felipe recognized the speaker as Miguel Cortez, superintendente of the rancho owned by Don Carlos Martinez. He was middle aged, short and stout, and notorious for his cruelty to those who worked under him. He was the right sort of man for his employer.

For Don Carlos Martinez, despite his hidalgo blood, was a wastrel and licentious, forgetting the responsibilities of his rank and station, and received only cold and distant nods from others of gentle birth.

Two years before, Don Carlos had inherited properties on the death of his father. Because he gambled heavily, and spent huge sums in lavish entertainment whenever he visited Monterey, he was becoming impoverished. Men whispered that he had mortgaged his estates heavily. He left management of the rancho to Miguel Cortez, and cared little what methods Cortez used.

Now, Cortez stood out before the others and spoke to Fray Felipe.

"The half-breed known as Juan killed Don Esteban Sanchez with a skinning-knife he took from the sheep pens, where he had been working. I saw him, and caught him robbing the body, and brought him to San Gabriel. The rogue managed to escape me, and rushed here to claim sanctuary."



"Ho, señores !" he cried. "I am Zorro ! Troopers pursue me, and may be here soon !"

THE priest did not flinch. "Which he shall have." Fray Felipe said, sternly.

"As you will, fray! Confess the rogue, shrive him, pray with him through the night. But at dawn he leaves sanctuary, and we hang him. And we will camp here to make sure he does not get away."

"Enough!" Fray Felipe shouted. "Remain on guard if it pleases you. But act in an orderly manner, and do not desecrate the mission."

Men in the mob began muttering, and the crowd started breaking up into small groups. Fray Felipe watched them a moment, his mind troubled at this blood thirst and violence. Then turned to reenter the chapel.

But he came to an abrupt stop and gave a sigh of relief at what he saw. A carriage drawn by prancing black horses was entering the mission compound. A native coachman handled the reins, and a native footman sat beside him.

In the carriage, reclining on fat silk cushions, was a young caballero dressed in resplendent attire, who brushed his nostrils with a scented handkerchief and stifled a yawn with a hand the fingers of which were adorned with jeweled rings.

This was Don Diego Vega, son and heir of Don Alejandro Vega, one of the wealthiest and most prominent men in Alta California. But the hidalgo blood which coursed his veins never seemed to set Don Diego afire. He did not join other young caballeros in their feverish adventures, but read poetry and cultivated roses, which made men decide that he was nothing but a fop and a spineless jellyfish.

The coachman shouted a warning, and the crowd parted to let the carriage through. It stopped in front of the chapel. Don Diego looked around at the crowd, turned up his nose slightly as if at an unpleasant odor, and stepped from the vehicle and upon a strip of crimson carpet the footman had been quick to spread.

"Welcome, Don Diego, my son!" Fray Felipe greeted, cordially. "What wind of good fortune blows you here?"

"I was visiting in the neighborhood, padre, paying my respects to a beautiful señorita and her estimable parents, and thought I would stop to break bread with you and spend the night in your guest house," Don Diego replied. "Usually, it is so quiet and peaceful here. But now I find a tumult that makes my head ring. What is the meaning of this riot?"

"Come into the chapel, Don Diego, and I'll explain," Fray Felipe said.

Don Diego followed him inside, and the fray closed the heavy door in the faces of the mob. Don Diego saw a barefooted, ragged man kneeling before the altar. Fray Felipe gestured toward him, and spoke to Don Diego in hushed tones.

"He is Juan, a neophyte. He would not tell me a falsehood. He says Miguel Cortez caught him and tied him to a tree beside a trail, stuffing a cloth into his mouth so he could make no outcry. Cortez took his skinning-knife from him, and waited in the brush. Don Esteban Sanchez came riding along the trail alone."

"Sanchez is a dear friend of my father's," Don Diego said.

"Your father will grieve. According to Juan, Cortez sprang out of the brush and stopped Don Esteban, pulled him from his saddle and stabbed him to death."

"Monstrous!" Don Diego cried.

"Juan heard Cortez say, 'Now, Don Esteban, you cannot press Carlos Martinez for payment he cannot make.' Then, Cortez untied Juan, and made an outcry, which called workers from a field. He accused Juan of the murder and brought him to San Gabriel. That is the story. And who would believe the word of a nameless ragged half-breed against that of Martinez' superintendente?"

"I would, for one," Don Diego said.

"Sí. And I, for another, my son. But possibly nobody else. Juan told me his story and I believe him. It has been thought that Don Esteban held a mortgage on Martinez' estate. No doubt he hoped to seize the property and drive the notorious Martinez from the country."

"How came this Juan here?" Don Diego asked.

"He twisted away from Cortez and ran here to claim sanctuary. Cortez aroused the mob. If Juan leaves sanctuary, the mob will kill him. That is bad enough, but there is more."

"And that?" Don Diego questioned.

"I know I may speak freely to the man I christened and who confesses to me," the fray said. "Evil times have come to Alta California. Unscrupulous politicians rule the land. Favors are sold or given to friends. The missions have become wealthy through the toil and sweat of the padres and neophytes, and the politicians covet that wealth."

DON Diego nodded his head. "That is true," he admitted.

"There is strife between the missions and the political rogues. They would seize our herds and flocks, the goods in our warehouses, and turn us out. And look where I stand in this affair. If I free Juan, knowing he is innocent, it would be said we Franciscans are protecting our neophytes though they are murderers. That would arouse men against us."

"I can see that, padre."

"If I surrender Juan at dawn, it will be worse. For the natives we have converted believe they have a refuge in their faith, that it protects them from injustice. If I do not protect Juan, they will think there is no truth in our teachings, will desert the missions and return to the spiritual darkness from which they came."

"You are in a tight corner, padre." Don Diego judged.

"Juan can be saved, and I be freed of this dilemma, if the real murderer could be unmasked before dawn."

"The mob would have to be convinced of his guilt," Don Diego interrupted.

"I know one man who could accomplish it."

"And he is–?" Don Diego questioned.

"Señor Zorro. The man who rode the highway and helped the oppressed, and punished evildoers without mercy. It has been some time since he was active. He should become active again."

"Señor Zorro, the fox," Don Diego muttered, looking straight into the old fray's burning eyes. "I wonder how many men know his real identity?"

"Possibly only two, his father and his father confessor," Fray Felipe replied, smiling slightly. "What say you, my son?"

Don Diego glanced again at the altar, where the terrified Juan was imploring help. He faced Fray Felipe once more, and his reply was a whisper: "Zorro will ride tonight."

"I thank you, my son. Providence must have sent you this way today."

"I need some help. I must have a man to take a message to Bernardo, my body servant."

"Let us step outside, and I'll call a man."

They left the chapel, and Fray Felipe summoned to the one he wanted, a man he could trust. Don Diego instructed him:

"Ride at top speed to my father's house in Reina de Los Angeles," Don Diego instructed him. "Find Bernardo, my body servant, and tell him I will spend the night here, and want him to come immediately on his fast riding mule, fetching my heavy sleeping robe."

"I understand, señor."

"Bernardo cannot speak, having been born dumb, but he can hear and will understand. Tell him I said, 'Bring everything I need for the night.' Those exact words. Here is a bit of gold for your trouble."

The man accepted the gold, grinned, knuckled his forehead in respectful salute, and hurried away.

Bernardo reached the mission an hour after nightfall. He had been a loyal servant to Don Diego for years, and knew his secret. Being unable to speak, he could not reveal Zorro's identity even under torture, and the written word was beyond him.

Bernardo tied his mule, tucked a bundle he had brought beneath one arm, and hurried to the guest house, where Don Diego was waiting in the room assigned him. Bernardo bobbed his head and unrolled the bundle, which contained only the sleeping robe.

"You understood, Bernardo?" Don Diego asked.

Bernardo grinned, and nodded that he had.

"You brought the clothes of Zorro and his horse and hid them in some safe place near by?"

Bernardo nodded in the affirmative.

"Get my couch ready, and remain here until I return."

Don Diego strolled across the main room of the guest house to the open outside door, and looked out into the compound. Fires had been built, and men were sprawled around them. There was a sliver of moon, which would give just enough light to make moving shadows deceptive.

A sudden tumult at the gate attracted Don Diego's attention, and he saw two troopers riding through. One was Sergeant Manuel Garcia, from the barracks at Reina de Los Angeles.

Don Diego drew back swiftly out of sight. As Zorro, he had clashed with Garcia often enough. He did not fear the man, nor did he make the mistake of underestimating him.

GARCIA had brains and instinct, he was a good horseman and an expert swordsman. And he had sworn long before to unmask Señor Zorro some day and stretch him lifeless on the earth with a deft thrust of his blade.

Don Diego watched the troopers dismount and tie their horses, and saw Fray Felipe welcome them and send them to the eating hut. The fray then approached the guest house and joined Don Diego in the doorway.

"They heard in Reina de Los Angeles about the crime, and soldiers have come," the fray reported. "But even the Governor's troopers dare not violate sanctuary, so Juan is safe until dawn. The troopers will save him from the mob, but that will not help."

"What mean you, padre?"

"Our alcalde is on a journey. So the magistrado will come from Reina de Los Angeles in the morning to judge the case. It will be Juan's word against that of Cortez, and the magistrado is an unscrupulous rogue and will not affront the mob by a moment's hesitation. He will order Juan hanged forthwith, and the soldiers will carry out the sentence."

"Then Zorro has work to do tonight. If any ask for me, padre, say you believe I have retired."

"I have learned that Miguel Cortez has gone to the tavern down the highway, and that Carlos Martinez is there for the night. Martinez has engaged a room on the patio."

"That information saves me considerable time," Don Diego replied. "I have plans in mind."

"Everything must be accomplished before dawn, if Juan is to be saved and the situation cleared," Fray Felipe reminded him. "Buenas noches, my son!"

Fray Felipe shuffled away with his hands thrust into the sleeves of his tattered robe. Don Diego returned to his room and closed and bolted the door. In whispers, he explained to Bernardo what had happened and what he intended doing.

On a sheet of parchment, he scrawled a message, and tucked it into his sash. He paced the floor for a time, thinking, then extinguished the tapers in the candelabra, so the room would be dark and it would appear he had retired. He opened a window in the rear of the room, and he and Bernardo dropped through it and crouched in the darkness outside the wall of the compound.

Keeping to the dark spots, they got away from the mission and into a coulée, followed this for a short distance, and in a mass of brush-shrouded rocks came to where Bernardo had tethered the black horse Zorro rode. From beneath a clump of brush, the mute pulled a roll of clothing, Zorro's attire. Another bundle contained Zorro's blade, his pistol, powder horn and a pouch of bullets.

In the darkness, Don Diego Vega changed his attire and became Zorro, dressed in black and with a black mask over his face. Into his belt he thrust the charged pistol and the parchment he had prepared in the guest house.

"Remain here," he instructed Bernardo. "If I am chased and reach this spot, you will know what to do."

Then Señor Zorro mounted quickly and rode away through the darkness.

He circled the mission at a distance and approached it cautiously from the opposite direction, eyes strained as he watched shadows, ears attuned to catch every sound.

The rabble around the fires were laughing and shouting, and evidently were passing wineskins around. The gate of the compound stood wide open. Zorro felt in his sash for the message he had prepared. On the parchment, he had scrawled:

The man Juan is innocent. The slayer of Don Esteban Sanchez is known to me, and soon I shall expose him.
Zorro

He rode toward the gate of the compound, approaching it slowly through the shadows. When he reached a spot where he could look through the gate, he surveyed the scene well.

Suddenly, he touched his horse with spurs. The big black sprang into action. With thundering hoofs, he dashed through the gateway and straight toward the fires and the men scattered around them.

Zorro gave a wild screech that rang out above the din and attracted the attention of all around the fires. Some men sprang to their feet, and others struggled to stand.

IN A shower of gravel and dust, Zorro stopped his horse within the circle of light cast by the largest fire, so they would have a good look at him.

"Señores, atencion!" he shouted. "Read this–if any of you can read." He tossed the parchment toward the nearest man. "And tell that pig of a Sergeant Garcia that Zorro is here. Perhaps the sergeant would like to capture me, and earn a fine reward."

"Zorro!" the men began shouting. "It is Zorro!"

Zorro menaced them with his pistol and backed his horse away from the fire. He held them off until he saw Sergeant Garcia lurch from one of the buildings with the trooper behind him.

"Ho, Garcia!" Zorro cried. "Glutton and wine soak! Are you able to climb into a saddle? Can you use a blade?"

"By the fiend, you need a lesson," cried Garcia, and hurried toward his horse with the trooper running after him.

Zorro rode through the gateway, but did not urge his horse to speed until he saw Garcia and the other follow through and take after him. Then, Zorro began maneuvering to keep just beyond pistol range, playing with the pursuit, knowing that the horse he bestrode could give distance easily to the mounts of the troopers.

Reaching the highway, Zorro turned toward the tavern a mile distant. This roadside inn had a reputation not of the best. It was known as a haunt of smugglers and other rogues, where dice and cards attracted some and wine others. The presence there of troopers or any other representatives of law and order was not desired.

The tavern was a long, low building built around a patio in which there was a well. It was set in a grove of huge trees and thick brush, with a winding lane leading to it from the highway. Two torches burned outside the front door.

Now that he had revealed to the pursuit that he was riding to the tavern, Zorro used his spurs and distanced the troopers. They would follow there, he knew, and being only two in number they would be cautious about entering the place because many rogues were gathered in the big main room. Nothing would delight such gentry more than to slit the throats of a couple of the Governor's troopers and leave the bodies beside the highway.

Nearing the tavern, Zorro left the lane, pulled his horse down to a walk and rode him into the depths of the grove, where he dismounted and tied the black, then hurried back to the building.

He heard the pursuit coming. But there was a sudden cessation of hoofbeats, and he knew the troopers had pulled up and were riding beneath the trees. Undoubtedly, they feared ambush, possibly thought that Señor Zorro had lured them here to their undoing.

Zorro desired their presence, for he wanted official witnesses. His one fear was that Garcia and the trooper might interrupt proceedings too soon. That was a chance he had to take, but he had taken desperate chances before. He shifted his scabbard, made sure of the pistol in his belt, and slipped noiselessly along the side of the tavern to the front door.

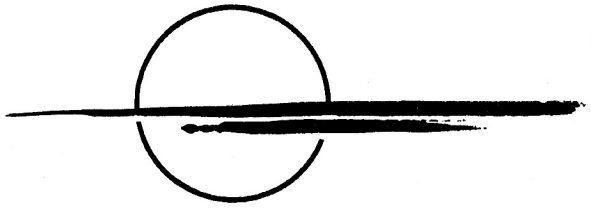
Glancing through a window he passed, he saw that the big main room was half packed with men. Thieves and vagabonds they were, smugglers and possibly a few wanted murderers among them. They were drinking, playing at dice and cards. The fat landlord was shuffling around, watching his native servants as they poured from the wineskins and collected coins.

Smoke swirled across the room from the fireplace and from cigaritos and pipes. It blackened the strings of peppers which dangled from the rafters, and gave new flavor to the haunches of meat being cured. Reeking torches illuminated the place, save where a couple of the larger gaming tables were decorated with old, battered candelabra in which tapers burned.

At one of the large tables Don Carlos Martinez was sitting on a stool, with Miguel Cortez beside him. Martinez had a heap of coins before him, and was playing cards, while Cortez guarded his master and his gold.

Zorro ran to the door, jerked it open and entered swiftly, slammed the door behind him and dropped the heavy bar into place. He ran across the room to the other door, which opened into the patio, and stopped there and turned to face those in the room.

"Ho, señores!" he cried. "I am Zorro! Troopers pursue me, and may be here soon."



Zorro began to press the fighting.

INSTANT silence fell in the big room as all turned their heads to stare at him.

"Zorro," some man muttered. "Zorro!"

"There is a reward offered for my capture, as possibly you know," Zorro said. "Is any here mean enough or brave enough, to try to earn it?"

A man lurched to his feet.

"So you are Zorro, and the troopers are pursuing you, eh?" he asked.

"Only two of them pursue."

"And do we here fear only two such scum?" He turned to the others. "This is Zorro, who whipped a magistrado once because he defrauded a poor peon. Are we friends with a magistrado or with the man who whipped one?"

A chorus of howls answered that, and Zorro knew he had nothing to fear.

He whirled and dropped the bar across the patio door, then confronted them again. And suddenly he seemed to see Martinez and Cortez for the first time. His eyes gleamed through the slits in his mask as he strode toward them, his right hand resting on the pistol in his sash.

"Señores!" he cried to the men in the room. "Have you lost your wits? Are you trying to put nooses around your own necks?"

They shouted questions as to his meaning.

"Is it not true," Zorro asked, "that there has been an informer busy recently? Have not some friends of yours been taken, testimony given against them? Have not men been hanged, and others farmed out at hard labor?"

Growls and expressions of rage answered that. For these men had friends who had been seized by the Law recently. Such were always being arrested and punished, but now that it was called

to their attention, the rogues in the tavern remembered vividly that there had been an epidemic of such seizures for some little time.

"That means a spy at work, does it not?" Zorro asked, standing back against the wall and looking directly at the table where Martinez and Cortez were sitting. "Fools! You gather here to have your fun. Wine loosens your tongues, and you talk of things which would hang you. Ears are open to catch that talk."

"Whose ears, Zorro?" somebody shouted.

"What man in this room is not one of you? There sits Don Carlos Martinez, a hidalgo, a man of broad estates, and the superintendente of his rancho beside him. They are hearing everything you say. Because they play at cards and dice with you, you are foolish enough to accept them as friends."

Exclamations of rage came from a score of throats. Some men got up from their stools and benches. They stood with feet far apart, shoulders hunched, hands working like claws, rage suffusing their faces.

And, at that moment, Zorro saw what he had been waiting to see–the faces of Sergeant Garcia and his trooper at one of the small open windows. Whatever happened now would be seen, whatever was said would be heard officially.

Don Carlos Martinez sprang to his feet with Miguel Cortez beside him. Fear showed in their faces. The ruffians before them would tear informers to pieces, torture them brutally before killing.

"Wait, señores–amigos!" Martinez shouted. "Who is this man who makes such an accusation? Have you ever seen his face? Does he not always wear a mask?"

"If my face ever is known, my work is done," Zorro said. "Perhaps I am a man well known. Perhaps, as my own self, I am in a position to learn the moves of the soldiery, and so escape them."

The ruffians howled with delight at that, then turned toward Martinez again.

"We trust the masked man who once whipped a magistrado," their spokesman said. "We trust a man the soldiers pursue. But how do we know we can trust you, Don Carlos Martinez? What have you and your superintendente ever done to make you one of us? You are a rich hidalgo. You often go to Monterey and visit the Governor."

"Seize him!" another shouted. "Get his superintendente, too! Knives for them!"

"Wait!" Martinez shouted. "I tell you that Miguel Cortez and I are your friends. We like men of your stamp. We like to gamble and drink with you. Landlord! Bring out a fresh skin of wine. Give my friends what they want."

"He would buy you off," Zorro said.

MARTINEZ scowled. "As for you, Señor Zorro, it will please me to cross blades and carve you," he shouted, angrily. "What does it profit you to arouse these men against me?"

"We'll attend to these rats, Zorro," the leader of the rogues shouted.

They surged forward, and Martinez and Cortez retreated to stand with their backs to the wall. Cortez got a pistol from his belt, and Martinez reached to draw blade. But they knew they could not hope for a victory against their foes. They might kill or wound two or three, and then the knives would be carving at them.

But Zorro sprang forward, and got between the two against the wall and those who would use their knives.

"Wait!" he shouted. "My friends, I have only been showing you that you are careless. Don Carlos Martinez and his man could easily have been informers. You accepted them without using any care. Let this be a lesson to you. If you value your necks, be careful in your talk hereafter when strangers are around."

"But, Zorro, you said–" the leader began.

" 'Twas but a lesson I hope you will take to heart. You have nothing to fear from Martinez and Cortez. They are one with you, as I happen to know."

"Explain!" they shouted.

"You all have heard how the rich Don Esteban Sanchez was slain today. A nameless half-breed even now crouches in the chapel at the mission, accused of the crime. In the morning, the troopers hope to hang him. But he did not kill Don Esteban. I happen to know who did."

"Tell us!"

"Don Carlos Martinez says he is your friend. Is that true, Don Carlos?"

"It is," Martinez replied. "I would be the last to betray them."

"You will not care, then, if your friends know something of your affairs." He faced the rogues. "Señores, because Don Carlos has been a good fellow, because he likes wine and games, he has

been losing his estates. Don Esteban Sanchez had a mortgage, and demanded payment."

"Enough!" Martinez cried.

"Let your friends know the truth, señor. Let them learn they have nothing to fear from you, or they may yet use their knives."

"Tell us more, Zorro," somebody shouted.

"I tell it all. Miguel Cortez today plotted well. He seized the half-breed, tied and gagged him. He slew Don Esteban, then untied the nameless one and shouted for help. He accused the half-breed of the crime and brought him to San Gabriel. But the nameless one escaped and ran to the mission and claimed sanctuary until dawn.

"By doing this, Cortez helped Don Carlos, for it will take time to settle the Sanchez estate, and by the end of that time Martinez can prepare to pay. The pair planned the murder, and Cortez executed it. Does that not make them one of you?"

Cortez' eyes were bulging at this recital of the truth, and Martinez' face had paled. Zorro glanced toward the window again, to see Sergeant Garcia and the trooper still there, interested listeners.

"How dare you say such a thing?" Martinez cried at Zorro. "With my blade, I'll split you like a goose!"

"You are with your friends, señor," Zorro pointed out. "Possibly every man here has slain another. They will not believe that you and your superintendente are informers now–if there is truth in what I have just said."

"But how do we know it is truth?" the spokesman of the rogues demanded. "Perhaps you, Zorro, have been misinformed."

"Use the knives!" another man howled.

They surged forward again, eyes agleam and knives ready. Terror came into the face of Martinez. He threw up a hand to stop them.

"Wait!" he shouted. "It is true. It is as Zorro told you. Now you know that I am one of you, and that Cortez is, also. And any of you are welcome on my rancho whenever you care to visit. I will even show you fine hiding places, if you are pursued."

The ruffian stopped.

Some turned back to the tables in order to gulp wine.

"And, since I am one of you, I settle personal differences your way," Martinez went on. "This rogue who calls himself Zorro–were I sure he was of proper blood, I'd cross blades with him and carve out his heart."

ZORRO laughed. "My blood is better than your own, Carlos Martinez," Zorro said. "I swear it!"

"A fight!" somebody cried. "Let blades ring!"

Miguel Cortez had returned his pistol to his sash, but now he drew from it a knife. Martinez whipped out his blade and Zorro retreated a few steps swiftly and got his own from scabbard.

The rogues tossed tables and benches aside and made a cleared space in the middle of the room.

"I'll run you through," Martinez was shouting. "Then I'll tear the mask from your face and see what manner of man you were."

Zorro knew Martinez was trying to rivet his attention. From the corner of his eye, he saw the swift move Miguel Cortez made, saw the knife gleam. Zorro's left hand dropped to his own sash to jerk out his pistol. It spoke, but the ball sang past Cortez' head and struck the hard adobe wall to ricochet with a whine.

Cortez hurled the knife, which grazed Zorro's shoulder and clattered to the floor.

"Treachery," Zorro cried at the rogues. "Seize Cortez and hold him while I fight this man."

They shouted approval, rushed forward as Cortez tried to get out his pistol again, seized him, disarmed him, and held him back against the wall. Zorro tossed his useless pistol to the floor.

Blades held ready, he and Martinez met in the middle of the room.

"I'll see your blood," Martinez cried.

Martinez attacked furiously, and Zorro retreated, keeping on the defensive while he felt out his opponent. Martinez was good with a blade, but Zorro knew after those first few moments that he had nothing to fear.

He stopped retreating and stood firm, then began pressing the fighting. He heard a tumult in the patio, heard the native servants screeching in fear. Zorro glanced at the window again, to find that Sergeant Garcia and the trooper were there no longer. The front door, and the one opening into the patio, were barred inside, but the small door opening from the kitchen of the tavern was not. And through this door now stormed Sergeant Garcia and his trooper.

"Soldiers!" Zorro shouted at the rogues. "A troop of them. Save yourselves! Out the front way!"

They rushed to the door and took down the heavy bar, and many ran out into the night. But others remained, those having no particular fear of the soldiery at the moment. The door remained open.

"Grab that man Cortez," Garcia shouted to his trooper. "He is under arrest for murder. Handle him quickly! Bind him! Try to have a poor half-breed hanged for murder, will he? And this fine gentleman, who instigated the crime, will get his desserts, also." He started toward where Martinez was fighting with Zorro.

"Back, Garcia," Zorro shouted. "This is my business. Help your trooper with your prisoner."

Martinez was making a fresh onslaught and Zorro pretended to retreat before him, edging his way toward the open door. Too late, Sergeant Garcia understood the ruse. He could not squeeze past those flying blades and get at Zorro now. "You–Zorro!" Garcia cried. "Highwayman! There is a price on you."

"Try to collect it, señor," Zorro said.

He had stepped back to the door now, with Martinez after him and pressing the fighting. And through the ring of steel he heard the wastrel's plea.

"Do not let them hang me," begged Martinez. "If you are a hidalgo, slay me now with your blade. End my life. Do not let me die on the gallows."

Martinez attacked with fury, then, Zorro found it necessary to defend himself. The blade he sent home through Martinez' heart was in self defense. Martinez gave a sigh and collapsed in the doorway.

Before Sergeant Garcia could struggle over the body, Zorro was outside and speeding through the darkness.

He reached his horse, untied him and sprang into the saddle. The black spurned the ground with his hoofs.

SWIFTLY Zorro left the highway and circled, out-riding the trooper Garcia sent in pursuit, while the sergeant prepared to take his prisoner back to the mission in custody. The rogues had scattered, and would not bother Garcia by going to the defense of such a man as Cortez, who blamed his crime upon another.

In time, Zorro reached the spot where Bernardo was waiting.

"All is well," he said. "Rub down the black while I change clothes. Then come with me to the mission for your mule, return here and get the horse, and be on your way before daybreak. If you are missed, I'll say I sent you back to Reina de Los Angeles with a message."

He changed clothing swiftly, and they hurried to the mission carefully through the darkness. They got into the room through the window. Working swiftly, Don Diego half undressed, lit the tapers in the candelabra while Bernardo cleaned telltale dirt from his boots, then opened the door and strolled into the main room of the guest house.

There was a tumult in the compound. Somebody had brought word of what had happened in the tavern. Don Diego walked to the door and strolled toward the chapel, meeting Fray Felipe almost in front of it.

"I honor myself by being your guest for a night, padre, and you reward me with an air-splitting din," Don Diego said, yawning. "Is there nothing but turbulence in the world?"

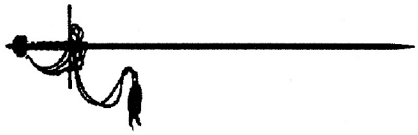
"Thank you, my son," Fray Felipe whispered. "I am going now to give the good news to Juan. After this, his faith and that of other neophytes will be stronger."

"Let me go with you," Don Diego begged. "I want to see the expression in the man's face when he learns he has been saved. And then I will need your ministrations, padre. I was compelled to take a human life tonight."

ZORRO

Upsets A Plot

Again the bright blade of Zorro flashes –
To snip a web of intrigue tarnishing his honor
And to rescue a girl held prisoner !



WHEN darkness closed down that day there was a drizzle of rain, and a heavy fog had rolled in from the sea to engulf the hills of Alta California with its sticky dampness. It would be a miserable night for honest folk, though no doubt it was a night favorable to such as did their nefarious deeds under cover of darkness and inclement weather.

In his tiny adobe hut on the outskirts of the pueblo of Reina de Los Angeles, Pedro Perez was he content as he sat on a stool in a corner and watched the dancing flames in the fireplace. His young, motherless daughter, Juanita, moved gracefully around the hut, attending to the stew in the pot which swung on a crane over the blaze.

Juanita's bare feet pattered on the beaten earth floor as she went to a tiny table where she had been fashioning tortillas. She was almost seventeen, and Pedro Perez feared she would be marrying soon and leaving him alone in his hut. But that was a thing to be expected. He would miss her smiles and laughter, and the throaty songs she sang. She was so like her mother at the same age.

The wind died down for a moment. And during that moment hoofbeats could be heard approaching the hut. Pedro Perez got up from the stool with alarm in his face. None of his friends rode horses. Only one or two of them were rich enough to have broken-down, cast-off mules to drag a cart. Either same wayfarer was approaching, or one of His Excellency's soldiery. This might mean trouble.

Juanita ran quickly to a corner of the hut and got behind some hanging skins, peering around the edge of them with her eyes wide and her mouth agape. As he waited, her father was thinking of the state of affairs in the country.

Why should an honest, hard-working man feel fear when a horseman approached his habitation? Why did not the laws, and those named to enforce them, protect the poor and helpless? Why should aggression stalk a land the good God had made beautiful and drenched with alternate rain and sunshine to make the earth bring forth its bounty?

The hoofbeats stopped at the hut, and there came knock on the door.

"Open, Perez!" a harsh voice called. "At once!"

Pedro Perez took a deep breath, unbolted the door and pulled it open.

"You are to do just as I say … If you do, soon you will be clasped in your father's arms, and be safe. Come !"

LIGHT from the fire and the burning tapers on the table streamed out into the night and revealed a huge black horse, and a rider dressed in black, with black cloak and hat and a black mask over his face. A pistol was in his sash, and a blade was hanging at his side.

"Do you not know me, Perez?" he asked. "I am the man they call Señor Zorro."

"Ah!" Perez cried, happily. His face lighted up with a smile as he took a quick step forward. "The good Señor Zorro, who rights wrongs with his blade! Friend of the poor and helpless!"

"Enough of that!" the masked man said. "Is your daughter, Juanita, at home? I would speak with her."

Perez beckoned, and Juanita left the corner timidly and went to the doorway to stand in the light. Her eyes were wider still as she looked up at the masked rider.

"Closer, child," he ordered. "You do not fear Zorro, do you?"

"No, señor," she replied. "Each night I pray for your safety."

He reached down and took her hand, gripping it so that she winced.

"Rest one foot on the stirrup and swing up behind me," he ordered. "Be quick, señorita!"

"What would you do, Señor Zorro?" Perez asked, hurrying forward. "What has happened? Where would you take my daughter?"

"To my hideout in the hills, fool," the rider replied. "I grow lonesome there without the company of a woman."

"But she cannot go alone with you, Señor Zorro. She is a good girl. Of course, it would be a great honor for her to be the wife of Señor Zorro. But how could you dare stand before a padre? You would have to remove your mask and disclose your true identity."

"Bah, marriage is out of the question!" the rider answered. "I want your daughter, Perez, and I take her!" That is all. Perhaps I may send her back to you some day."

"No–no!" Perez cried, lurching forward.

Juanita had been pulled up behind the masked rider, but now she tried to get down to the ground again. He laughed and wheeled his horse and used his rowels. The black horse disappeared into the night, the girl's wild cry came back to Perez on the wind.

For a short distance, the hoofs of the big black pounded the sodden earth. Then, the horse was pulled up. Other riders approached.

"Here come some troopers, señorita," the masked rider said. "They will pursue me, and my horse cannot outrun them while carrying double. So I'll drop you here. Perhaps I'll come for you again. Scream, and they will find you and take you back home."

Juanita screamed for help as the masked rider thundered away into the night. There were no pursuit, for two troops came to a stop beside the screeching girl. The masked rider rode on to Reina de Los Angeles, approached the barracks there, stabled his horse in an adobe hut, removed his mask and changed clothes swiftly. Then he strode through the drizzle to the front of the barracks and went inside. Halfway down a passage, he stopped before a door and knocked.

"Enter!" a voice called.

He entered, closed and barred the door behind him, stiffened and came to a salute. Before him, sprawled in a chair, with a goblet of wine in one hand, was Capitán Carlos Ortega, commandante of the post.

"Report!" Ortega ordered.

"It was perfect, Señor el capitán. Everything went off smoothly. I left Perez howling for help and shouting maledictions. The men have the girl."

"You are a clever man, Sergeant Garcia," Ortega praised him, getting up and stretching his arms. "It is a pretty plot, you conceived. This unknown Señor Zorro is adored by all the riffraff in the country because he rights wrongs, aids the oppressed!" The capitán ceased speaking to laugh raucously. "Sí, you have a crafty mind."

"The riffraff will not adore him so much now," Sergeant Garcia said. "Perez will shout

around that Zorro stole his innocent daughter and carried her away to the hills. No more will the peons and natives think this Zorro is a saint. Even the robed Franciscans, who pray continually for his welfare, will turn against him now. He will not find help and sanctuary on every side."

"You thought up a splendid plot," Capitán Ortega declared. "It will start the downfall of this Zorro. Since you are such a noted swordsman, it shall be your pleasure, I hope, to cross blades with the rogue and stretch him on earth. And Garcia–do not forget, when we have the rascal and the reward is paid, we shall share equally in the gold pieces. They will dazzle the eyes of the señoritas, and possibly bring promotion to us both."

THERE was a sudden tumult at the door of the barracks.

"That probably is Perez coming here to lodge his complaint," Ortega said. "We must appear indignant. The girl is safe in a prison room by this time, and we'll keep her there without anybody knowing except us two and the couple of troopers who aided you. When the time comes to release her, we will give out that she was held after being rescued because we thought Zorro might learn she was here, come to rescue her, and ride into a trap."

"Any further suggestions, Señor el Capitán?" Sergeant Garcia asked.

Ortega tossed him a couple of pieces of gold. "Better go to the tavern on the plaza with a couple of the men after Perez has departed, as you originally planned. Stir them up against Zorro. Use this gold freely and buy wine for all. You know how to do it, Garcia. Play upon the riffraff until they are ready to go for Zorro's throat."

"It is likely that the affair may bring Zorro out of hiding to protect his good name," Garcia reminded Ortega.

Capitán Ortega smiled. "I hope so," he replied. "That is the most ingenious part your plot."

That same evening, Don Diego Vega was in his father's house on the hillside near the pueblo. Dressed in silks and satins and wearing a heavy embroidered robe, Don Diego reclined before a fireplace as he munched fruit and read poetry.

He heard a tumult in another part of the house, and an expression of annoyance crossed his face. As he tried to concentrate on his reading, the door was opened, and his father, Don Alejandro Vega, stood before him. Behind Don Alejandro was Diego's body-servant, Bernardo, who had been born dumb.

"Do not arise, my son," Don Alejandro said, as Bernardo closed the door. "One of the servants just brought word from the pueblo that Señor Zorro has been at his tricks again."

"Indeed?" Don Diego lifted his eyebrows slightly.

"A short time ago, this Zorro stole Pedro Perez' daughter, Juanita, and carried her away to the hills. There is a great hue and cry about it. Perez is like a madman. The soldiers are making loud talk about Zorro not being such a friend of the common man as he pretends."

"Interesting," Don Diego said.

"What do you think of it, my son?"

"It is understood," Don Diego said, "that Zorro is often aided by the peons and natives, and that the good padres of the missions wish him good fortune in his work. If they should turn against Zorro because of this affair, it may cause Zorro trouble. Not to mention that it will ruin his reputation as a just and merciful man."

"You are right, Diego."

"I do not believe–nay, I am sure–that Zorro would do such a thing. So, there are a couple of possibilities. Perhaps, for his own benefit, some scoundrel is posing as Zorro. Or, perhaps this is a trick of the soldiery to arouse the people against Zorro."

"I have thought of that, my son."

"If Zorro is wise, he will investigate immediately, clear his good name, and punish those who have wronged him. It is a thing that cannot wait. Bernardo!"

The dumb body-servant stepped forward, grinning, and bobbed his head.

"Zorro rides tonight, at once!" Don Diego said.

Bernardo opened the door and hurried out. Don Alejandro touched his son's arm. "Use great care, Diego," he whispered.

A few minutes later, Don Diego Vega slipped from the house through a rear door, and went through the foggy night to an adobe hut some distance away. Bernardo was there, and Zorro's horse was ready.

"You will follow me on your riding mule, as usual," Don Diego said, as he changed clothes rapidly and got into the costume of Zorro. "I shall investigate matters at the barracks, and then possibly at the tavern."

They rode carefully through the fog and mist until they were behind the barracks, and then Señor Zorro dismounted and went forward alone. He crouched against the rear of the building and listened. None of the troopers' horses was saddled and tethered to the hitching rail in front. Nor was there a tumult coming from the men's lounging room.

ZORRO went through the darkness along the wall, and came presently to a window in the guards' room. He heard voices, and listened.

"The girl weeps her head off in the prison room," one of the guards was saying. "A pretty wench, for a peon. And a pretty plot it is."

"You think so," another replied. "Not for us. We fetch the girl here, and Sergeant Garcia and the other take the capitán's gold and go to the tavern to spend it freely and arouse men against Zorro. What do we profit?"

"One of us is enough to be on guard."

"Sí. But here we both are."

"Do you also go to the tavern and have some of the free wine," the other said. "Garcia will not care. Possibly he will not even question you. If he does, say we are taking turns. And do not forget to come back in time for me to go there and do some drinking. If you do, forget me not."

"I'll see that you have your turn," the other said.

Listening at the window, Zorro heard him scurry away. Zorro continued along the wall. At another window, he heard a girl weeping and listened for a moment.

"Señorita!" he murmured softly. "You are Juanita Perez?"

"Sí, señor. Who calls?" She appeared at the window, her hands clutching the bars.

"Attend me closely, señorita. It was not Señor Zorro who carried you away, but another man posing as him. It was a trick to cause Zorro difficulties. Do not be alarmed when I come soon to rescue you."

"Ah, I did not feel that Zorro would do such a thing," she said.

"Careful! Do not speak and let the guard hear. Be quiet until I come."

"Who are you, kind señor?"

"I am the real Zorro, señorita. Be quiet, and wait."

He left the window and hurried on through the darkness. A torch burned in front of the main entrance of the barracks, but nobody was in sight. Zorro slipped along the wall to the door, peered in and found the main corridor empty.

He felt of the pistol in his sash, took it out, and entered the building. Noiselessly, he went along the corridor and turned off into another, and approached the open door of the guards' room. He looked in, and saw the lone guard sprawled on a bench in front of the fire.

"Do not make a sound!" Zorro called out in low tones.

The guard's head jerked around. Then he gave a squawk of surprise and sprang to his feet. But there was no belligerency in his manner. He flattened himself against the wall, gulping, his eyes bulging as he regarded Zorro's pistol, which menaced him.

"What a fine guard you are!" Zorro commented. "I could ransack the place, no doubt!"

"Wh–what do you want here, señor?" the

"Stand !" Zorro shouted, brandishing the pistol.

guard asked.

"Keep your voice down."

"All the others are gone, señor. The capitán is visiting a friend. The sergeant and my comrades are making merry, drinking at the tavern."

"Where are the keys to the prison rooms?" demanded Zorro.

"On that ring on the bench, señor."

"Stand still!" Zorro ordered.

He strode forward and picked up the ring of keys, and attached the ring to his sash. Then he went on to the wall and took down a coiled reata.

"Stretch on the floor on your face, and put your arms behind your back," Zorro ordered.

"Thanks, Señor Zorro, for not slaying me," the guard blubbered. "I am only a poor trooper of the lowest grade. I have no ill feeling toward you, Señor Zorro. Tie me up well, so I may say a dozen men overwhelmed me. Kick over the benches and stools."

Behind his mask, Zorro grinned at the other's fear. He made a noose and fastened the guard's hands behind his back, then rolled him over and tied him well from head to feet, and fastened the end of the reata in a ring-bolt in the wall.

"Has the señorita been harmed?" he asked sternly.

"No, Señor Zorro. Just frightened. We only took her from where she was dropped by the sergeant."

"Then Sergeant Garcia acted the part of Zorro tonight?"

"Sí, señor. But do not let anybody know I told you, or they will whip me."

"I'll gag you now," Zorro said, and did so with the man's own neckcloth.

HE HURRIED along the semi-dark corridor and unlocked the door of one of the prison rooms, to face the frightened girl.

"Come!" he said, grasping her hand. "Ask me no questions now, for there is not time to answer them."

He got her out of the building, led her through the swirling fog to the darkness behind it.

"Wait here," he ordered. "If you run away, you will be ungrateful, and may also cause your father trouble."

"I trust you, señor."

"You know I am not the same man who stole you away from your home?"

"I know, señor. He was shorter and heavier in body, and his voice was harsh."

"Remember that," Zorro said. "Now, wait!"

He left her and hurried through the darkness to where Bernardo was waiting.

"I have the girl," he said. "I will take her to the tavern and leave my horse behind it. Be near with your mule, but be careful the girl does not see you and identify you later as my servant. If I call the signal, ride your mule and decoy the pursuit."

Zorro mounted and rode carefully back to find the girl waiting. He helped her up behind him.

"It is not the same horse either, señor," she whispered, "and the saddle is different. Ah, I felt that Zorro would not do such a wicked thing as steal me from my father's hut."

"Be silent," he cautioned.

In time, he stopped the black some distance behind the tavern, where it was dark. He dismounted and helped the girl down, tied the horse to a stunted tree, took the girl's hand and led her forward slowly.

"You are to do just as I say," he instructed her. "If you do, soon you will be clasped in your father's arms, and be safe. Come!"

They reached the side of the tavern building and stopped beside a large open window, which let the fog drift into the big main room of the tavern and smoke roll out. As the girl crouched against the wall, Zorro lifted his head cautiously and peered inside.

Sergeant Garcia was strutting around the room with a goblet of wine in his hand. Some of his troopers were sprawled on the benches. Men of the town and travelers off the highway were drinking with the soldier, and the native servants were scurrying about, filling goblets and mugs from wineskins. The fat landlord had a grin on his face. Business was good tonight.

"This Zorro has proved himself to be a rogue instead of a man who aids the oppressed," Garcia was declaiming. "He has fooled you all. But we of the soldiery expected the scoundrel would do something like this in time. It is another crime marked up against him. Abductor of innocent girls! We will never cease effort till we run him to earth!"

Zorro looked over the place carefully as Sergeant Garcia continued his tirade. Half the men in the room were intoxicated to a point where they had slow wits and slower muscles. Of the other half, most were of the sort who would recoil from combat with anyone, especially a man with the reputation of Zorro. He made his plan swiftly.

"Your father is there, señorita," he whispered, bending down beside her. "I will take you to him."

"Oh, señor! They may fight with you and take you."

"It is a risk Zorro always runs, señorita. Hasten to your father's arms, and be sure to declare aloud that I am not the man who

abducted you. I will attend to the rest."

He took her hand and led her cautiously toward the front of the building. Because of the fog and mist, the plaza was deserted. Only a couple of torches burned, and those were in front of the little chapel not far away.

Nobody observed them as they went slowly along the front of the tavern and toward the open door. Sergeant Garcia was still declaiming.

"It is a monstrous thing this fellow Zorro did! Think of it, you who have daughters and sisters! Should he not be swinging with a rope around his neck?"

They howled their agreement, and called for more wine.

"Look at poor Señor Perez, sitting there and weeping into his goblet," Garcia continued. "His pretty daughter was all he had in the world. Now he is bereft. There he sits, weeping, and his fair daughter–where is she?"

AT THIS moment Zorro, holding his pistol in his right hand, thrust the girl through the doorway.

"She is here, señores!" he shouted. "Make no move, or I shoot!"

There was deep silence for a moment as the face of every man in the room was turned toward the doorway. Then the señorita gave a glad cry and rushed to her father.

"The real Zorro did not steal me," she cried, as she was clasped in her father's arms. "He just rescued me, from the jail."

"How came you in jail?" Perez demanded.

"The man who stole me dropped me, and two troopers picked me up and took me to the barracks, putting me in a prison room. That is the real Zorro–there in the doorway. And the man who stole me, who pretended to be Zorro, is there." She pointed at Sergeant Garcia. "I recognized his voice when he was talking."

"What means this, Sergeant Garcia?" Perez thundered, putting his daughter aside and reaching for the knife in his belt.

Others in the room came to their feet, their attitude menacing. The troopers there were waiting for orders from the sergeant.

"It was a trick, Señor Perez, to lure Zorro out of hiding and into a trap," Garcia said. "Your girl has not been harmed. And now we have Zorro here, and will deal with him. At him, men!"

The troopers sprang to their feet as the others in the room rushed to get back against the walls.

Zorro had made plans for this moment. He could not fight them all, and it was Garcia he wanted to meet on even terms. He had moved from the doorway, and saw he could not get through it now, for two of the troopers had rushed there. He darted across the corner of the room to the window.

"Stand!" he shouted, brandishing the pistol. "It was a trick–sí–to make everyone think ill of Zorro. Now you know I did not do the thing of which I was accused."

"Seize him!" Garcia shouted. "There is a reward!"

He started forward himself, whipping out his blade, despite the fact that Zorro held a pistol and the sergeant had none. His troopers jumped forward also. Zorro sprang to the window, and his pistol roared and spewed smoke and flame and a slug which struck the adobe wall and ricocheted.

An instant later, he had gone through the open window head first, to strike the muddy ground outside.

"After him!" Garcia shouted to his troopers. "To your saddles, and run him down! Fetch him back here!"

The troopers ran for the doorway. Outside, Zorro gave a peculiar cry which was a signal to Bernardo, waiting somewhere near. As the troopers got into their saddles, they could hear the pounding of hoofs.

"There he goes!" Garcia shouted. "After him! Catch me the rogue!"

The troopers dashed away through the billowing fog in pursuit. But they pursued, not Señor Zorro on his black horse, but Bernardo an his fleet riding mule. Zorro laughed silently as he crouched against the

back of the tavern. He had no fear that the troopers would capture Bernardo.

The tavern had been emptied of men during the tumult, and not many cared to return. There would be no more free wine, they rightfully guessed. Now that the plot had been exposed, Sergeant Garcia would not toss away any more money.

Those who did re-enter the tavern finished emptying their mugs and then grouped before the fireplace to dry themselves. Sergeant Garcia was unable to claim their attention. There were men in that room who had entertained a friendly feeling for the unknown Zorro and his works, who had known a moment of distrust concerning him, who had faith restored in him now and scorn for the man who had tried to besmirch him.

Garcia finished a goblet of wine, went to the doorway and turned.

"When this Zorro is taken, we will commence looking for those who have been his friends," he threatened. "He always runs away, the rogue. 'Tis fortunate for him that he has a swift horse."

"'Ho, Sergeant Garcia!" somebody outside in the night shouted.

Garcia went to the doorway. "Who calls?" he yelled.

"Señor Zorro calls, poltroon! Abductor of girls! Man who makes clever plots that go astray! Ass and dolt! Can you fight, fellow?"

SERGEANT Garcia howled a curse and sprang outside. Some of those in the room followed him swiftly. A short distance away, Zorro was standing in front of the chapel, in the circle of light cast by the torches.

Garcia whipped out his blade and started forward, and some of the men in the tavern followed.

"Do not be afraid, señor," Zorro taunted. "My pistol has not been reloaded. Dare you fight me fairly with a blade, Señor Sergeant?"

"Nothing could give me more pleasure," Garcia shouted, as he charged forward.

Zorro whipped blade from scabbard and stood ready. The mist was still falling, and fog swirled, and the torches cast a flickering uncertain light, but what was fair for one was equally fair for the other.

Their blades met and rang. The men from the tavern came up closer and spread out to watch, and others came running, and shouts that there was a fight rang around the plaza.

A robed padre came from the chapel, lifted his hands imploringly, then retired quickly to pray, for he knew he could do nothing to stop such a combat.

Garcia attacked with a rush, and Zorro retreated with skill, maneuvering to keep the light out of his eyes. So they felt each other out a moment, eyes agleam, nostrils distended with their deep breathing. Garcia expected a duel to the death. Zorro knew that failure would mean death or capture, exposure, pain for his father, possibly execution as a highwayman if the sergeant did not slay him.

Garcia pressed the fighting. Here was an exceptionally skillful swordsman, Zorro found. Here was no ordinary, clumsy sergeant of the governor's military. Zorro felt that the other would call forth all his skill with a blade.

"This is your end, highwayman!" Garcia said, as they fought. "We'll soon have that mask off and see what manner of face is behind it."

"Fight, poltroon!" Zorro answered. "With your blade instead of your tongue!"

More men had come running, and Zorro feared that some might not be his friends, or that a trooper might appear to use a pistol against him. He pressed the fighting in turn. The blades darted in and out and sang and flashed in the light of the torches.

Once, Zorro slipped on the wet stones in front of the chapel, and Garcia's blade flashed over his shoulder. That was how narrowly the sergeant had missed. But Zorro sprang to his feet again, and now was with his back to the torches, which bothered the sergeant until he tried to turn slightly aside.

In a frenzy, Zorro attacked. He brought into play all the tricks of swordsmanship he

knew. Sergeant Garcia, he found, was a worthy foe. But Garcia was tiring. His reactions were growing slower. He tried to press the fighting again, and this time Zorro did not give ground before the onslaught.

"I could kill you now, Garcia," Zorro said. "But you have not done anything against me to merit death. So far, you have only done your duty."

" 'Tis my duty to slay you–and also my personal pleasure," Garcia howled.

"I always mark my foes–so that all men may know them," Zorro said.

He had Garcia where he wanted him. He avoided a wild thrust, his blade darted forward, and Sergeant Garcia recoiled with a scream, dropping his blade and clawing at his face.

The tip of Zorro's sword had done some fast writing on Garcia's left cheek. Carved there was the letter Z.

"Seize him!" Garcia howled. "The reward!"

Zorro sped away. Some few men started after him, but only to make a showing. Zorro reached the black horse waiting in the darkness, mounted and sped away, his shout carrying back on the rushing wind.

Some time later, Señor Zorro turned over the black to Bernardo, who had out-ridden the troopers and was waiting at the adobe hut. With a change of raiment, Zorro disappeared, and Don Diego Vega got cautiously into the house, removed his sodden boots, put on comfortable slippers and his embroidered gown, and sprawled on the divan in front of the fireplace.

PRESENTLY, his father entered the room. Don Diego looked up at him.

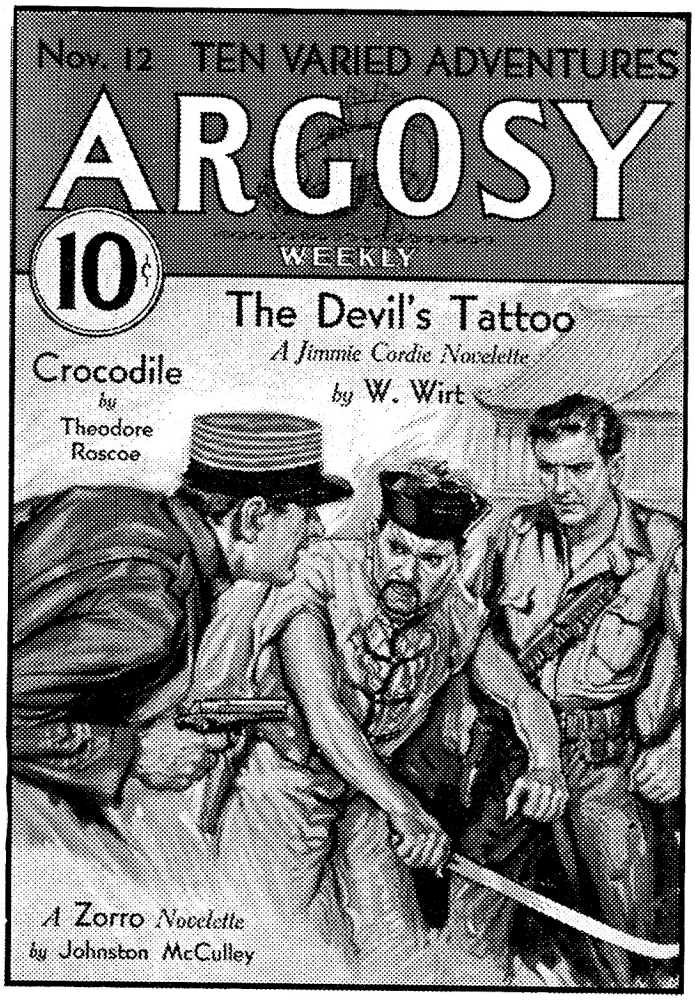
"Here is a beautiful passage in this poem," he observed.

"Read it to me at another time, Diego," his father said, his eyes twinkling. "Just now tell me, if you care to do so, about another passage–the passage at arms which I understand occurred a short time ago on the plaza."

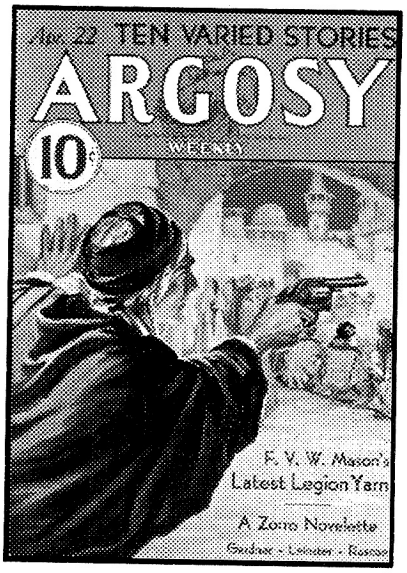
Don Diego answered in lowered tones. "This Sergeant Garcia is a man to be reckoned with," he said. "I was compelled to extend myself. The man knows how to handle the blade. Caution must be my watchword in the future."

Then he picked up the book of poems again. His father smiled and went slowly from the room.

THE ARGOSY YEARS

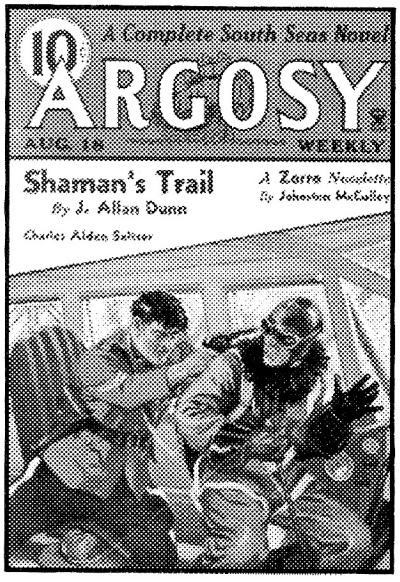


ZORRO
Saves A Friend
Argosy Magazine
November 12, 1932

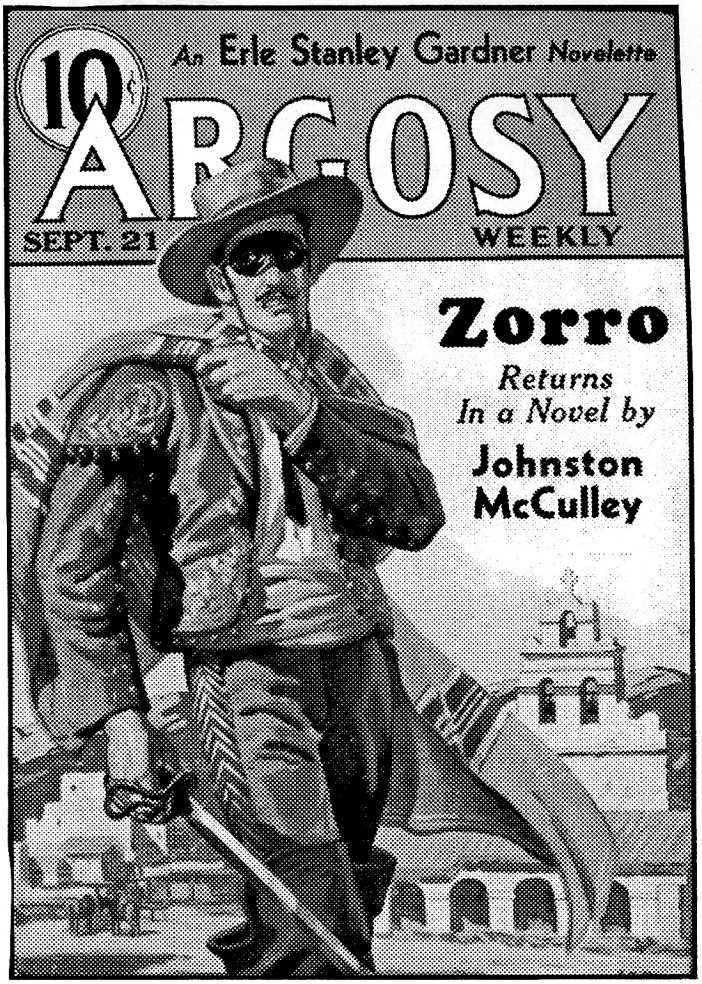


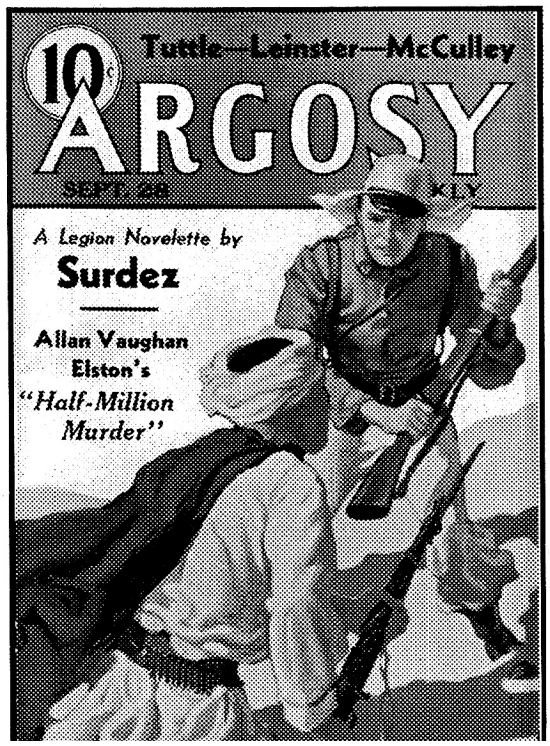
ZORRO
Hunts A Jackal
Argosy Magazine
April 22, 1933

ZORRO
Deals With Treason
Argosy Magazine
August 18, 1934



Mysterious Don Miguel
Argosy Magazine
September 21, 1935
September 28, 1935





Hero....

I was asked to give a few thoughts about being asked to contribute to this book. I have one word that keeps going through my mind...

HERO.

Wonderful word, doesn't need much of a definition, does it? In fact, it pretty much is it's own definition. According to the second entry in the American Heritage Dictionary, the word is defined as follows:

"A man noted for feats of courage or nobility of purpose, especially one who has risked or sacrificed his life."

Now why go through all this you may ask? Simple. To help make the point that in all of fiction, especially pulp fiction, there is one word that is synonymous with Hero. That word is...

ZORRO !

A lot of today's comic book reading youth may disagree, I'm sure. They would recite names such as: *Batman. Punisher. Wolverine.*

Sorry, not even close. Pale imitations.

Zorro was and is as clean and honest a hero as you'll ever find. A man who used his wealth and his life to instill hope and courage in his fellow man. Indeed, Zorro's greatest weapon was not a car or a boat, retractable claws or a mobile armory, but, the very people he was trying to vindicate. The men and women of old California, seemingly sheep-like, became wolves at the mere mention of Zorro's name or the sight of his mark. They found within themselves the boldness and bravery to fight against their oppressors and isn't that what a hero is all about?

Today's heroes replace courage with high-tech armor and weapons, use nobility of purpose to mask a deadly sin-wrath. I find myself sounding like my father when I say, "They don't make 'em like they use to." Maybe it is that I'm getting older or maybe its just the simple truth that they really don't make heroes like they use to anymore. That's fine, I suppose, it's not like the old ones have going away. I guess that's what makes them great and ... well ... heroic.

Now, what does all of the above have to do with why I agreed to contribute to this book? Easy.

Doesn't everyone want to be associated with a hero?

Mark Bloodworth
August 1999

The Contributors....

THE ART OF JOEL F. NAPRSTEK

Racecarart@aol.com

PAGES : Cover, 1, 3, 19, 25, 26, 32, 37, 49, 51, 59, 61, 65, 70, 71, 75, 85, 90, 92, 94, 96, 101, 102, 103, 107, 117

A freelance illustrator since 1972, he taught painting and illustration for years at *The New York School of Visual Art* and *The Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Design.*

He has done work for just about everyone, including : Dark Horse, DC Comics, Marvel Comics, Kitchen Sink, Malibu, Science Fiction Age, Realms Of Fantasy, Pulp Adventures, Inc., AT&T, Consumer Electronics, The Children's Television Workshop, Scholastic, NBC, CBS, Fortune, Business Week, Random House, McGraw-Hill, Time, Inc., etc. ...

He is especially sought-after for his painted covers.

A racing enthusiast, he designs and paints classic race car pictures. He is the closest thing you can find to a true 'pulp artist', in that he not only loves the pulp style artwork, but he passes along that enthusiasm to his students. He is on his way to painting all of the great pulp heroes with *The SPIDER: Master Of Men* and *ZORRO* under his belt already. He has also done covers for DC Comics Pulp Heroes Annual series.

To view his work, and get a peek at his masterpiece *FLYING TIGERS*, his web site is:
http://members.aol.com/frozencat/JFNART.html

THE ART OF FRANKLYN E. HAMILTON

PAGES : Back Cover

A **Favorite** in the pulp community, he is a wizard of pen and ink. His illustrations grace many books, magazines and fanzines. He is the featured artist on the *Spider: Master Of Men series* back covers. His work is always featured in *The Pulpster*, the official program book of Pulpcon.

THE ART OF GLEN OSTRANDER

info@mediasi.com

PAGES : 14-31-46

Glen Ostrander is a freelance illustrator who was born and raised in Columbus, Ohio. He attended the Columbia College of Art & Design from 1992-1997 before earning his Bachelors of Fine Arts degree in illustration and Visual Communication. His work mainly spans the genres of Horror and Fantasy.

Glen welcomed the Zorro project as a nice change. "Zorro to me is a timeless, classic character. He rights the wrongs of men in a time where justice could be served by a blade."

THE ART OF MARK BLOODWORTH

info@mediasi.com

PAGES : 62-98-108

Convinced at an early age that his brother was switched at birth by gypsies, a young Mark Bloodworth was shocked to find out that the changeling was ... himself ! His lineage descending from Italian circus folk and British merchant mariners, Mark learned at an early age that he had no balance or coordination to speak of and he moved through water with the grace and technique of an anchor. This, along with an unerring ability to alienate people in the most obnoxious of ways, gave him many years of solitude with which to hone the only skill he possessed: drawing comic books.

This led to working on *Nightstreets* for Arrow Comics (where he met Randy Zimmerman), then on to *Hellraiser* for Marvel/Epic, over to Caliber Comics where he toiled on such titles as *Deadworld*, *Cheerleaders From Hell*, *Negative Burn*, *Triggerman* (with Malcolm Bourne), *Raven Chronicles*, *Jack The Ripper*, and the latest, *The Ripper Legacy* (with Jim Alexander). Along the West Coast he stopped at Slave Labor to work with William Harms on the graphic novel *Abel* and PCGamer Magazine to delve into such wonderful frivolities as *The Coconut Monkey Coloring Book* and *Strike!* .

These days Mark spends his days rendering storyboards for local ad agencies and drawing pictures for use in publications such as the one you are holding.

THE ART OF RANDY ZIMMERMAN

info@mediasi.com

PAGES : 62-98-108

Born, raised, and still living in the mid-Michigan area, Randy Zimmerman has carved a career in the realm of alternative comics for the last fifteen years – with numerous titles and credits to his name. Randy is currently Editor-in-Chief of Arrow Comics and enjoys writing and drawing various projects under the Arrow Comics banner.

When given a chance to ink some of the illustrations in this book, Randy jumped at the chance. "Zorro is one of those rare heroic icons that is completely timeless, and will always be available in one form or another to entertain and influence the young, and the young at heart. It was an honor to be part of this book."

Randy would like to dedicate his work in this volume to the memory of **Larry Godin**, a deeply missed friend who, along with Tarzan and Prince Valiant, counted Zorro as one of his favorite heroes.

THE ORIGINAL INTERIOR PULP ART

ARTIST UNKNOWN

PAGES : 22, 23, 40, 41, 54, 55, 80, 86, 87, 104, 113

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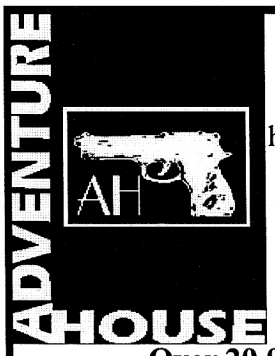

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Part Three	August 23	1919
Part Four	August 30	1919
Part Five	September 06	1919

The Further Adventures of Zorro

Part One	May 06	1922
Part Two	May 13	1922
Part Three	May 20	1922
Part Four	May 27	1922
Part Five	June 03	1922
Part Six	June 10	1922

ARGOSY MAGAZINE

Novel

Zorro Rides Again

Part One	October 03	1931
Part Two	October 10	1931
Part Three	October 17	1931
Part Four	October 24	1931

Novellas

Zorro Saves A Friend	**November 12**	**1932**
Zorro Hunts A Jackal	**April 22**	**1933**
Zorro Deals With Treason	**August 18**	**1934**

Novelette

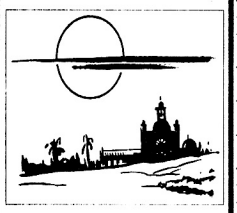
Mysterious Don Miguel

Part One	**September 21**	**1935**
Part Two	**September 28**	**1935**

Novel

The Sign of Zorro

Part One	January 25	1941
Part Two	February 01	1941
Part Three	February 08	1941
Part Four	February 15	1941
Part Five	February 22	1941



WEST MAGAZINE

Short Stories

Zorro Draws His Blade	**July**	**1944**
Zorro Upsets a Plot	**September**	**1944**
Zorro Strikes Again	November	1944
Zorro Saves a Herd	January	1945
Zorro Runs the Gauntlet	March	1945
Zorro Fights a Duel	May	1945
Zorro Opens a Cage	July	1945
Zorro Prevents a War	September	1945
Zorro Fights a Friend	October	1945
Zorro's Hour of Peril	November	1945
Zorro Lays a Ghost	December	1945

WEST MAGAZINE

Short Stories

Zorro Frees Some Slaves	January	1946
Zorro's Double Danger	February	1946
Zorro's Masquerade	March	1946
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Zorro's Twin Perils	May	1946
Zorro Plucks a Pigeon	June	1946
Zorro Rides at Dawn	July	1946
Zorro Takes the Bait	August	1946
Zorro Raids a Caravan	October	1946
Zorro's Moment of Fear	January	1947
Zorro Saves his Honor	February	1947
Zorro and the Pirate	March	1947
Zorro Beats a Drum	April	1947
Zorro's Strange Duel	May	1947
A Task for Zorro	June	1947
Zorro's Masked Menace	July	1947
Zorro Aids an Invalid	August	1947
Zorro Saves an American	September	1947
Zorro Meets a Rogue	October	1947
Zorro Races with Death	November	1947
Zorro Fights For Peace	December	1947
Zorro Serenades a Siren	February	1948
Zorro Meets a Wizard	March	1948
Zorro Fights with Fire	April	1948
Gold for a Tyrant	May	1948
The Hide Hunter	July	1948
Zorro Shears some Wolves	September	1948
The Face Behind the Mask	November	1948
Zorro Starts the New Year	January	1949
Hangnoose Reward	March	1949
Zorro's Hostile Friends	May	1949
Zorro's Hot Tortillas	July	1949
An Ambush for Zorro	September	1949
Zorro Gives Evidence	November	1949
Rancho Mauraders	January	1950
Zorro's Stolen Steed	March	1950
Zorro Curbs a Riot	September	1950
The Three Strange Peons	November	1950
Zorro Nabs a Cutthroat	January	1951
Zorro Gathers Taxes	March	1951
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47: Slaves Of The Black Monarch (The Web by James Van Hise)
48: Machine Guns Over The White House (The Web by Don Hutchison)
21: Hordes Of The Red Butcher (The Web by Mark Wheatley)
36: The Coming Of The Terror (The Web by Gahan Wilson)
37: The Devil's Death Dwarfs (The Web by Chris Kalb)
38: City Of Dreadful Night (The Web by Nick Carr) (March 2000)
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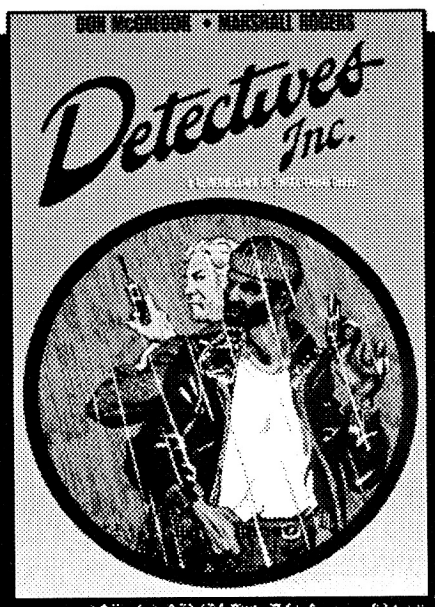

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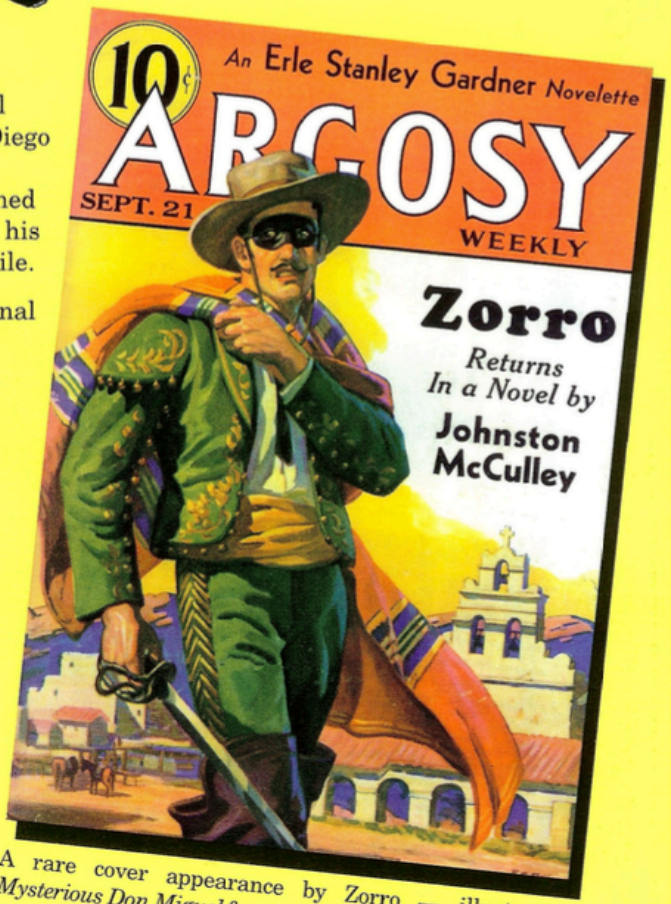

A rare cover appearance by Zorro — illustrating *Mysterious Don Miguel* from the Argosy of Sept. 21, 1935.

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